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## Socio-cultural and Gender Oppression in Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*

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### **Abstract:**

*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, the first book of Kiran Desai, published in 1998, won the Betty Trask Award. The novel is superb in many ways. In this novel, Desai depicts a biting satire of the nutty situation and all sorts of peculiar characters at a small town in contemporary North India. It is a matter of study how the satiric elements in the novel constructs a postmodern satirical perspective, it also a matter of discussion as to how the modern changes challenge the traditional ideas. The novel mainly deals with social set up of India, furthermore, with a postmodern satirical perspective. In this respect the novel highlights two dominant dimensions of Indian society - gender oppression and caste system which are prevalent and handed down through the centuries. Kulfi and Sampath are social outcasts in the novel. Kulfi symbolizes a traditional Indian woman who is like other females set aside from the patriarchal system. She is not only ignored by her family, but unnoticed by the Shahkotians. On the other hand Pinky represents a rebellious thinking, a personal struggle against female oppression and gives a ritual castration against patriarchy. Sampath, the protagonist of the novel, constantly reprimanded by his father and deprived by the society and takes shelter in a guava tree. His sense of alienation and the renunciation of present existence from the mundane society have been humorously treated by Desai.

**Keywords: Gender oppression, female identity, marginalization, fantasy and reality.**

As a post modern novelist Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* depicts a biting satire of the nutty situations of human nature in various aspects of Indian society by the interplay of fantasy and reality. Unlike Rushdie's 'imaginary homelands' Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* suggests the vulnerability of natural havens and of any attempt at retreating from society and aims to examine "the difference between what things are and what they ought to be"(Pollard,3). She portrays a kaleidoscopic picture of Indian culture, tradition and ethos by a simple form of narrative; the story is told by a third-person narrator. The vivid description of everyday, Shahkot echoes R.K.Narayan's Malgudi in its evocation of small- town of India. Magic realism is the cardinal force throughout this novel with a perfect mix of the fantastic with the realistic. The novel proved its excellence in the respect of a post- modern perspective on the social issues like institution of marriage, rusty functioning of various government sectors like health, administration and education.

The novel mainly deals with social set up of India, furthermore, with a post-modern satirical perspective. In this respect the novel highlights two dominant dimensions of

Indian society- gender oppression and caste system. Sampath Chawla, an eccentric twenty- year-old boy living in Shahkot a small-town of India. His family is a typical case of an Indian patriarchal family. The august patriarchy demonstrated by Mr. Chawla, (B.A. pass), head clerk at the Reserve Bank of Shahkot, Sampath's father, and is apparent and unrestricted:

His shirt needed to be ironed. Hi shoes had been discovered dusty, dirty and unpolished. His socks upset him because they gathered in folds about is ankles instead of snapping with the satisfying sound of good elastic to a desirable mid-calf level. Ammaji and Pinky ran up and down trying to carry out his demands.(HGO 20)

Kulfi, Mr. Chawla's wife, symbolizes a traditional Indian woman, is total discontent and disconnect from Mr. Chawla's steady patriarchy and the norms of the society like social reject, lands her in daydream and frustration. Her role is full of uncertainty and confusion, "there was always something odd about her,' they said. 'You could tell this from the minute she entered Shahkot'" (HGO 5). Kulfi is ignored by her own family, as her inherits the familial lunacy, her father, with a dowry, tend to desert/give up her as early as possible, he can in order to protect the family reputation. Mr. Chawla's mother Ammaji, contented only with such a big amount in shape of dowry that Kulfi brought home. On the other hand Mr. Chawla is infatuated with her physical beauty, marries with her though he abhors her unsound mentality. Kulfi as a marginal woman utilized, manipulated, and abandoned by the steady patriarchy. Desai commented on the stringent criteria, set for an ideal bride in the novel which utterly demeaning to woman, "She should not be fat. She should be pleasantly plump with large hips and breasts but a small waist (HGO 58). This marginalization firstly from her own family and secondly from the community, Weisenburger, the postmodern critic, argues that "Postmodern fictional satire forces us to reconsider the role played by its grotesques" (24). Like other traditional Indian women, she set aside the sphere of everyday life from the patriarchal system, her unique dialogue with reality, which constitutes for her a means of survival.

In the blooming pregnancy Kulfi does not turn to her husband or mother in law 'but rather to the walls that cage her', drawing out the different types of desired dishes and food items shows her frustration, her dreams, making the bars of her prison serve the role of canvas. The status of women in India is regarded as subordinate to men. T. Scarlett Epstein, in "Culture, women and India's Development," argues that a woman is "a social appendix of her husband without any direct obligation to the gods" (Shah 34). Desai depicts the eccentricity of the people:

'Oh dear, what is going to become of this women?' said Lakshmi, the Raipurs, the Bengali teacher, and all of the others when they looked out of their windows, when they gossiped at the tea stall or at in each other's house eating peanuts together. 'There was always something odd about her,' she said (Desai 5)

In Indian social set-up, the birth of boy is always welcome and Kulfi's pregnancy also reveals the ingrained prejudices and expectations of the patriarchal society:

Everywhere there was the feeling of breath being drawn in and held, as if it wouldn't be let free again until the baby was born and it could be released-released

happy and full of relief if the baby was a boy; released full of disappointment and represent of it wasn't.(7)

Kulfi's suffocating breath is finally released when Sampath is born, his birth proved the true meaning of his name 'Good fortune' that brought rain after the long overdue monsoon awaited by the Shakotians who have been suffering from the unbearable drought "...he might not be very plump or very fair, he was triumphantly and indisputably male"(HGO 12). Mr. Chawla is contented with his familial sovereignty and the decision of marrying Kulfi, an eccentric woman, who is capable to manage two children:

With a wife like this and two children to look after and manage, Mr. Chawla grew more and more firmly established in his role as head of the family, and as this fitted his own idea of the way he ought to live, it gave him secret satisfaction despite all his complaining. He was the head of a family and he liked it that way. (HGO 65)

For Mr. Chawla, his love towards Kulfi is kind of paradoxical mutation. On one hand Kulfi's grotesque behavior like sleepwalking and manic obsession with cuisine, makes Mr. Chawla live on tenterhooks, "And over time Mr. Chawla had developed a sort of exasperated affection for his wife..." (HGO 64), on the other he is smitten by Kulfi's "flower beauty", "slender frame", and delicacy that makes her different from the other girls. As a queer woman, Kulfi is enjoying herself the most, rather than getting any benefit from the hullabaloo. She makes every effort to provide comfort to Sampath in the face of adversity. However, her lunacy seems to pass down to Sampath, indicating subversion inside the patriarchal framework. Desai posing between noise and silence, she uses the marginalization and invisibility of Kulfi as well as Sampath as a vehicle for its expression. Kulfi, in all ways more disconnected from the life of norms embodied by the town, is more extreme in her avidity for silence, though it is actually solitude that she seeks. This physical, oral and aural isolation is only heightened in the Orchard that, for others family members, face trouble, stress and anxieties as to how to settle Sampath, "Here in the Orchard, the hold of other people on Kulfi and her awareness of the retreated even further and like Sampath she discovered the relief of Space." (HGO 78)

Kulfi shows neither concern nor discernment for the society, which is, in all seriousness, a matter of considerable repulsion and regrets:

All round her was a landscape she understood profoundly that she could comprehend without thought or analysis. She understands it like she understood her son...Pinky was a stranger to her...But Sampath she knew. She knew why she was sitting in a tree... (HGO 78)

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Desai showed paradoxical mutation of gender oppression, and holds up to the patriarchal society on one hand Kulfi from her starved and difficult pregnancy endows Sampath a substitutive subject of female revolutionist. On the other, Pinky posses a masculine

personality, ready to challenge male authority, through Sampath, Kulfi seems, herself free from the confined track made up of materialized female body and slaved spirit by the patriarchal society. For Kulfi, Pinky is still stranger though she is female but with masculine qualities. “She continued on the path along which her life led her” (HGO 153).

Sampath, the protagonist of the novel, is a man with a feeble personality which is contrary to his father. He is a nuisance for his father, although his birth indicates that the boy is blessed with many specialties, but when he grows up to become a young man possessed of a great deal of feeling and very little common sense or ambitions. Like Kulfi, Sampath is also oblivious and holds a similar uncertainty like his mother, and remains unpredictable. He is wrapped up in his own thoughts, on an entire different world. At the wedding of Sampath’s supervisor’s daughter, his innocent cross-dressing and stripping solidifies in the minds of both townspeople and reader the strangeness of his way of thinking:

Sampath began to ...He unwrapped the last glittering length of fabric, but still he felt he had not yet reached the dazzling pinnacle of his performance ... he began to unbutton his shirt ...Sampath climbed deftly on to the highest tier of the fountain ... lowered both his trousers and his underpants ... he stuck his brown behind up into the air and wiggled it wildly in an ecstatic appreciation of the evening’s entertainment he himself had just provided. (HGO 41)

Sampath’s interring into a room in a woman-like figure/ incarnation and looking into the mirror symbolizes that he is in the process of recognizing his latent affection toward “Motherland”, and depression for patriarchal colonialism, “My suit is Japanese, tra-la-la, my lunch was Chinese, tra-la-la, but though I may roam, tra-la-la, don’t worry, Mama and Papa, my heart belongs to home. Oh, my heart belongs to home” (HGO 40) His striptease signifies a process confining /restraining oppressed women when he gradually takes his clothing off. Sampath achieves freedom from slavery, revolutionary goal for women; by disguising a “paternal male” as a “maternal strip teaser”, he creates an anti-tradition pretence, but it results tragic “jobless, sober and soaked to the skin” (HGO 41). However Desai reveals the social convention ironically. Through Sampath Desai also reveals a characteristic persona in postmodern satiric arrangement, a breaking of dichotomy in narration. As Weisenburger notes:

The best of these satires exemplify how postmodern culture has broken the spell of various binary, “othering” dualisms common to modernism: not only the signified and its signifier but also such thought-pairs as higher/lower, mind/body, conscious/ unconscious, subject/object, male/female, nature/culture. (P. 4)

Therefore, a different picture of opposite sexual temperaments could function in subverting the hierarchies. Both the characters Sampath and Pinky play an offensive role against the patriarchal mode of society, and furthermore demonstrate an elimination of male/female well-defined boundaries rooted in Indian patriarchal society as Sampath who adheres to this maternity and Pinky is effort to develop her paternal veins. Pink in order to consolidate her female position in the stratum of society, inheriting a paternal streak from Dr. Chawla:

...she was well aware of the necessary of putting in an appearance in the bazaar every day. If you did not do so, your place in the hierarchy of things, indeed your very identity in the social sphere, would be totally obliterated. (HGO 80-81)

Pinky not only refuses to be victim of patriarchy, but also dares to challenge male authority; “she speared a man who was not only taking up too much room in her opinion, but had made the mistake of winking at her”(HGO 29). The condition of women in traditional Indian patriarchal values is so passive that they bound to admire men unconditionally; however Pinky is exceptional. As a rebellious female she represents a struggle against female oppression, when she confronts Hungry Hop; “she bit his ear so hard that the Hungry Hop shouted out and his voice boomeranged about the town...A piece of his ear lay upon the ground” (HGO 113). In this way, she assures the legitimacy of female independence by making the patriarchal hierarchy wounded. Pinky proves that women could perform well by making use of their latent manhood. Therefore, the discovery of undiscovered self may be the solution of gender oppression.

Desai certainly criticizes /comments on the foibles of the Indian society, such as certain forms of religiosity, the credulous creations of gurus, the excesses of entrepreneurialism and caste system. However, some of the issues raised are of a more existential character, like Sampath withdraws to the orchard as a means of eschewing social responsibilities, such as his job and the behavior expected from a young man. The withdrawal to the wood in search of illumination, this would-be guru is looking for personal freedom and happiness, it seems that Sampath “has opted for a lonely course of life not because it clearly reflects the best way to live, but only the least painful” (Markey 1980, 60) Mr. Chawla makes every effort to cash in on the erratic behavior, eccentric body language and bizarre comments of Sampath who pretends to be able to read people’s minds and to know their private affairs. Mr. Chawla saw in his son an opportunity to make easy money:

Sampath might make his family’s 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! (HGO 68)

Sampath, dressed as a holy man, known as “Monkey Baba”, or “Tree Baba”( Desai 119) advised people in the form of proverbs, poetic parables in cryptic language, such as, “If you do not weed...your tomato plant will not flower” (HGO 75). Desai’s main target of satire is on the Indian sense of religiosity. She vividly presents the skill and *modus operandi* of the making of a saint in Indian society. Sampath’s godly existence, spiritual confusion of the devotees and life philosophy in the utopia-like orchard, leads to forget them in a fabricative, fictitious peace, directly reflecting spiritual plight that seizes the characters in the novel. As Weisenburger argues that the postmodern satire is “means of exposing modalities of terror” (5). The character in the novel are possessed with the postmodern kind of terror like Mr. Chawla and the Chief Medical Officer enter the orchard, seeking for spiritual alleviation, revealing a collective spiritual panic in modernity.

The importance of the caste system cannot be over emphasized in the status quo in Indian society. Lamb points out that “Castes (and families, too) are India’s social security system” (123). At some extent the caste system has been abolished but still exerts influence in the lives of common people. In *Caste, Class and Power*, Andre Beteille says, “The caste system is clearly a hierarchical system” (4). Desai shows an irresistible, destined reality of caste system in Indian society that one’s caste in present life cannot be overstepped no matter how hard one’s efforts could be. Furthermore, the overzealous spy produces close question toward human life, a “value-oriented inquiry” in postmodern satiric narration. (Wiesenberger, 3).

In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Desai satirizes the prevalent phenomenon of caste system, when Mr. Chawla came to know about the affairs between Pinky and Hungry Hop. He is disfavor with this relationship and says, Pinky to cease the relationship. According to him ice-cream family belongs to inferior caste:

An ice-cream-cart type. Our family name will be destroyed. You should set your sight higher than yourself, not lower. How dismayed he (Mr. Chawla) would have been to find the ice-cream family making similar remarks about his family. (HGO 149)

Why do the people seem to relish the seclusion provided by the guava orchard? What would be the consequences come out in the society by this kind of search? *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* depicts the vulnerability of natural haven and of any attempt at receding from society. There is no escape from society and history, the novel suggest in the ironic and humorous way. Desai satires the bureaucratic system through the back drop off driving off the monkeys, there is no coordination, among the government agencies while devising the strategy, therefore, novel reveals the paralyzed picture of government agencies. Desai raised her voice on serious issues for undermining the value ethos of contemporary society at every level, like entrepreneurialism, the credulous creation of gurus and the parochial aspects of Indian culture. Her novel is serious effort to serve a kind of barometers of human responses to social forces. Kiran Desai paints the graphic picture of Indian society and its major problems like- class distinction, cultural differences, loss of Identity especially female identity, the role of woman in Indian society, insurgency, superstitious etc. with a keen sense of humour. It is marvelous satire on the Indian society.

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