

## Reading Internal Exile in Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*

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### Abstract

This research paper undertakes a reading of Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* with respect to 'internal exile' and reads the work with a focus on the metaphorical movement of the character on a psychological and spiritual plane in negation of or in addition to actual physical movement or the exile in a more superficial sense. The paper seeks to evaluate the spiritual transformation of the protagonist Sampath internally as he moves away from the material concerns of Shahkot to experience the expanding horizon of freedom in the surreal realm of the guava orchard.

Keywords: Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard, Kiran Desai, Internal Exile

The diasporic paradigms are increasingly being reformulated in the globalized world. Among the newer generation of migrants, the traditional sense of being in exile is largely diminished. The development of facilities related to communication and travel have resulted in improved connectivity of the diasporic communities with their parent countries and kin. In the sphere of digital diaspora, the global citizens can communicate with his kinfolk in splits of seconds, consequently, the element of nostalgia is reduced to a great extent. In places like

Atlanta in the USA and Birmingham in the U.K., Asians, particularly Indians constitute a major chunk of the population, even outnumbering the natives at certain locations. Thus, the migrant communities live in a sense of home away from home in many locations.

It is evident that under the changing situation of a transforming world the external circumstances of geographical displacement have become less important while the internal circumstances, in terms of the psychological and spiritual conditions of the mind, are gaining prominence.

In the context of these changes, this paper seeks to explore *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, for nuances of 'internal exile' typifying the contemporary diaspora writings. In the novel, the protagonist Sampath does not externally move out of the geographical boundary of the town of Shahkot. He finds abode in the guava orchard and rather moves within Shahkot, on an internal, psychological plane, travelling through existential open spaces of freedom and spirituality. His movement from the town of Shahkot thus signifies the journey of his mind and spirit on a more profound level.

Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* echoes the nuances of the 'internal exile', showcasing the most intricate form of modern diaspora writings. Her work does not adhere to the traditional norms of diaspora writings, and instead mirrors the transforming world, undergoing a process of cultural convergence; wherein the external context of geographical displacement has become less significant than the internal exegesis, in terms of the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the mind.

Much in sync with the post-modern ethos, Desai leverages on the 'internal exile' and abstains from deploying the stipulated mix of traditional diaspora writings such as - dispersion, nostalgia and discrimination etc. Self-alienation particularly spiritual or psychological alienation is an important dimension of exile in the post- modern contemporary

society. John Simpson in *The Oxford Book of Exile* emphasizes the internal aspect of exile in the following words:

The early traces of internal exile dates back even before the time of Pericles of Athens, Ovid was exiled from Rome for publishing an obscene poem which is a part of *Tristia I*. Similarly, Virgil's *Aeneas* leaves Troy urged by the ghost of his wife. Illustration of internal exile is also found in Shakespearean plays in the form of banishment.

The phenomenon of exile not only appears in fiction, but as literature is an embodiment of life, it affects the expatriate. It manifests itself in several forms depending upon the writer's place of origin and the place of exile. The place of exile may be across geographical boundaries of the writer's place of origin or may simply exist in the mental landscape also it may be voluntary or involuntary.

In the case of actual physical departure (forced) from the country of writer's origin various factors such as politics, racism, religious discrimination, and war etc compel the writers to flee from their countries. A popular instance of forced exile of writers is famously found in P. B. Shelley, who was expelled from Oxford University and eventually from the conservative English society for showing his radicalism by publishing, *The Necessity of Atheism*. While in exile, Shelley expressed in one of his letters to Mary, his wife that he desired to abandon the human society. He expressed, —I would retire with you and our child to a solitary island in the sea, [. . .] and shut upon my retreat the floodgates of the world (Simpson, 216).

'Diasporic stints' of writers have contributed to the progress of English literature since ages. Some of them were forced to move out and write, particularly during the First and the Second World Wars. Thomas Mann wrote from his refuge in Chicago and Hermann Hesse wrote from Germany about such uprooting and also anticipated that Europe would be a

different place after the war. Some writers moved out of their native land voluntarily, due to personal reasons and choices such as not being able to adapt to the society, culture, climate, religion etc. For instance, Lord Byron set out on a self imposed exile, in search of a fertile ground for writing when he participated in the Greek War of Independence. Similarly, R. L. Stevenson lived the last four years of his life in Samoa because of his health and climatic considerations. Many writers like T.S Eliot and Henry James moved from America to Europe, in quest of the so perceived European intellectual and cultural superiority. In a post-modern setting, typified by a globalised, multicultural scenario, we come across writers crossing boundaries to fulfill their academic interests.

The post-modern modes of diasporic expression are thus being reformulated. In this context, the 'internal exile' that occurs on a mental or psychological landscape is a characteristic form of post-modern exile, which may appear in characters of a novel through existentialistic patterns or can be manifest in writers themselves, as a psychological phenomenon. It is understandably, a much more complex form of exile where the natives reside in their own country and yet feel alienated.

In the novel, the protagonist, Sampath Chawala, exiles himself from his family, colleagues, society and humanity seeking communion in nature when he lives a blissful existence along with monkeys on a tree top. He shows a rebellious approach towards the concept of society, throughout the novel. Though Sampath does not typically travel to cross the borders of India to suffer from the clash cultures and racism like Biju and Jemubhai in *The Inheritance of Loss*, yet he is also a sufferer, on a different plane, in a different league. Sampath craves for spaces of freedom, and in his case people of his own culture, though not different from him, become uncanny to him, as they do not fit into his perceived idea of a free state.

Sampath remains isolated since early childhood and is described as —a creature that looked as if he had come from another planet altogether, or had been discovered in the woods, like something alien and strange. (Desai, 12). Also, he remains perturbed and wrapped in his own thoughts finding it difficult to sleep, —up and down, back and forth. He walked to calm himself, as you would walk with a baby who cries and cries and cannot sleep. (Desai, 16) He feels trapped in his life and feels it, —was a never-ending flow of misery. It was a prison he had been born into. (Desai, 47). He is a social outcast preoccupied with idle daydreams and fantasies. He spends, —many blissful hours dreaming in the tea stalls and singing to himself in the public gardens. (Desai, 23) and —contemplating the mushrooming of milky clouds in his tea with a blank and hopeless expression on his face (Desai, 24).

Sampath retreats from the society to take refuge in Nature his act is compared to snakes leaving their old skins to proceed towards a new life full of happiness, serenity and peace:

Sampath thought of snakes that leave the withered rags of their old skins behind and disappear into grass, their presence unbetrays by even a buckle in the foliage; of insects that crack pods and clay shells, that struggle from the warm blindness of silk and membrane to be lost in enormous skies. He thought of how he was leaving the world, a world that made its endless revolutions towards nothing.

Now it did not matter anymore. His heart was caught in a thrall of joy... (Desai, 48).

In his new home, Sampath finds all that he treasures: freedom, peace, silence and solitude and most importantly Nature. He lives in his paradise, where his mind travels freely in an unrestricted natural manner, free from the boundations of customs, beliefs and rituals, inhabiting an open space of free thought and action. His blissful existence is reflected as follows:

He looked at the tree that was such a good home...Here, sitting not too high and not too low, he had seen the world in absolute clarity for the first time, the days emerging as if purified from nights of a clean and brilliant blackness. The sunlight coming in through the leaves at daybreak, shifting and flickering, breathing its fire-breath upon the bark, falling now and then upon Sampath, whom it treated as if he were not the solid being that he was, scattering him like water...He felt weightless here, rocked by this lambent light, lapped by the swell of flower and grass, of leaves as rich as fruit, being warmed to their different scents (Desai, 142).

Thus, with the character Sampath, Desai typifies post-modern diasporic distress where, the subjects feel alienated in their own homelands, within their own ethnic communities and travel to different destinations not on different locations of the globe but on different planes of the human mind. Desai, herself a post-modern diaspora writer, does not display the cravings for her homeland like her mother and the older generations of writers do. Instead, as a diasporic of the contemporary times she describes her homeland nostalgically, but the nostalgia is free from the pains, aches and cravings of her seniors. She paints the portrait of her country following the dictum of the new age and as lovingly adds colours to it as a conscious artist.

*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* draws close resemblance to Italo Calvino's philosophical work, *The Baron in the Tree* (1957). The novel recounts the story of Baron Cosimo Pio-vasco di Rondà who, in 1767, at the age of twelve, defiantly leaves the family dining table after refusing to eat one of his sister's unusual dishes, and climbs a tree in the property, vowing never to set foot on the ground. The plot of Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* draws many similarities. Sampath Chawala, like the Baron lives in the trees of the orchard. Further, in both works eccentricity is evident in both the protagonists' families, and they also display peculiarities with respect to cooking habits. Baron's sister

drives him away to take refuge in trees as she kills animals for cooking. Her parallel in Desai's creation is Kulfi, Sampath's mother, possesses absurd culinary skills and hunts for weird substances for preparing meals. Baron's younger brother, Biagio and Sampath's younger sister are normal people with simple earthy desires and provide contrast to their respective siblings.

Desai has mystified food in the novel, like many other diaspora writers including Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices*. Divakaruni's protagonist Tilo, seems to possess the magical powers of spices. She redresses the problems of local Indian expatriate community, whom Tilo dispenses wisdom and the appropriate spice: coriander for sight; turmeric to erase wrinkles; cinnamon for finding friends; fenugreek to make a rejected wife desirable again; chillies for the cleansing of evil. Desai imparts similar exotic, magical properties to food, brought in the form of Kulfi's obsession with food. Sampath's transformation into Monkey Baba is apparently catalyzed by Kulfi's magical recipes. Kulfi hunts strange ingredients for preparing meals; she seems to be fixed with the idea of cooking deer and even monkey towards the end of the novel. She considers it a "hard process to pick out —entirely new ingredients —still mysterious to her". Kulfi cooked only for Sampath, who seemed to have inherited a streak of her eccentricity, the mystical quality of her cooking is revealed in the following lines:

Almost all the day she worked, trying this and that, producing even in these early days of apprenticeship to her imagination, meals of such flavor and rarity that others could merely guess at what they were missing from the smells that rose from the pots, so intoxicating them by the evening's end that they had barely any recollection of what they had passed when they departed from the audience with Sampath. They felt filled, though, with a sense of magic and well being. (Desai, 79)

Desai's debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, at the outset seems like a light comic satire, but on a deeper reading manifests itself as a conte-philosophique, written in fauxnaive style of the literary folktale. It allures its readers with the eccentricities of Sampath Chawala in a comic fable style. The novel displays diasporic sensibilities as Desai paints a portrait of her homeland India, as it lives in her dreams by conjuring the town of Shatok set in India. Further, Desai as a post-modern diaspora writer upgrades the diaspora writings and presents her new version which moves away from the traditional elements associated with diaspora writings such as dispersion, discrimination etc. In a digital world, where people revive the memories of their homelands with Facebook, Twitter and Skype, the element of nostalgia seems to have diminished in intensity. Also in a world where borders of nations seem to merge with the tide of glocalisation sweeping over; the prescribed norms of diasporic features seem to erode. In such a world, Desai's new version of diaspora breaks away from the traditional tenets. Desai has incorporated the most intricate form of diaspora writings in her work in the form: internal exile.

In the contemporary age, where crossing borders loses its former depth of nostalgia, movement of the mind on different psychological and spiritual planes has become more significant. The protagonist Sampath does not step outside the boundaries of his hometown Shahkot, but he does enter the magical, enchanted realms of the Guava Orchard. He moves across a psychological plane where he isolates himself from the people of Shahtok, marching into a state of internal exile. He is thus, successful in entering a psychological zone of freedom from social conventions but is ironically mistaken as a hermit. Desai, thus expresses the diaspora sensibilities of the post modern diaspora writings.

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