KIRAN DESAI’S HULLABALOO IN THE GUAVA ORCHARD-A STUDY OF MAGIC REALISM

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ABSTRACT

Kiran Desai, the daughter of an eminent novelist Anita Desai, is the voice of younger generation of Indian English writers who explores the technique of magic realism in her debut novel Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard. This novel is about a maladroit protagonist Sampath Chawala. Being disgusted with the worldly life, he runs away from home to take refuge in the guava orchard, at the top of the guava tree. There he is mistaken to be a “Baba”. The event that follows is hilarious, highly imaginative and full of fantasy. At the outset the novel seem simple, but on closer observation is a microcosm for humanity. It depicts the eternal struggle for personal space, the human tendency to make profits out of any situation and the eternal pursuit of happiness by all in their own different ways.

KEYWORDS: Magic Realism, Comic Satire, Baba, Unfathomable Wisdom, Incarnation

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Indian English literature began in the nineteenth century when pioneers like Henry Derozio, Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and Soshree chunder Dutt published their first collection/book of poetry, drama, novel and short story braving the English language. Derozio’s poems (1827), Banerjee’s The persecuted or dramatic scenes illustrative of the present state of Hindi society in Calcutta (1831), Chatterjee’s Rajmohan’s wife (1864), and Dutta’s Realities of Indian life: stories collected from the criminal Reports of India (1835) are not only pioneering works in Indian English literature but the source of inspiration and courage for other Indian English writer’s who came after them. Indian English fiction has come a long way from the social realism of the founding fathers (Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayana, and Raja Rao) to magic realism and feminism of nineteen eighties, multiculturalism of the last decade of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty first century. Women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, and Kiran Desai depicted the contemporary society in terms of social, psychological, and magical realism with insight. The present paper explores the magic realism in Kiran Desai’s debut novel Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard (1998).

The word ‘Magic Realism’ is derived from the German ‘Magischer Realismus’, a phrase used in 1925 by Franz Roh to describe the quasi-surrealistic work of a group of German painters in the 1920s. Although’ Magic realism’ was applied to a short lived Italian literary movement of the 1920s known as ‘stracitta’, the term was not otherwise associated with literature until the latter half of the 1940s. Gradually, it came to be applied to fictional prose works that are characterized by a mixture of realist and fantastic elements. Realistic details and esoteric knowledge are intertwined with dream like sequences abrupt chronological shifts, and complex, tangle plots. Magic realists frequently employ fairy tales and myths in their works. The term is usually applied to novelists like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, John Fowlers , Gunter grass, Salman Rushdie and Kiran Desai.

Kiran Desai became the Youngest woman ever to win the coveted man booker prize for her second novel the inheritance of loss in the year 2006. She is the third booker laureate of Indian origin (the other two being salmon Rushdie and Arundhati Roy). Her debut novel, Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard announced the arrival of another Indian voice of
international stature. Salmon Rushdie praised her work by remarking that it’s a” welcome proof that India’s encounter with the English language continues to give birth to new children, endowed with lavish gifts”. India has always been depicted as a mystic land of strange magic charms, intricate religious rituals, spicy, cuisine and a land where spiritual leaders proliferate. Kiran Desai puts all these ingredients into the cauldron of her first novel and produces a recipe that not only is delectable to the Indian readers but also to the western literary audience.

From magic realism in Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard (1998) Where Sampath Chawal, a dull-Witted Youngman turned “Baba”of ‘unfathomable wisdom” is perched on a guava tree dishing out sagely advice for the ills of his devotees, Kiran Desai has turned to contemporary social and political realism in The inheritance of loss. Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard is the story of sampath chawala, born in a time of drought, in a sleepy town called shahkot . Sampath’s birth coincides with what his father thought was the end of the world; though it was also a harbinger of rain and food-much needed respite from heat and hunger (Desai, Hullabaloo--11).Sampath’s birth was not one of those usual ones. The “enormously large”, kulfi, sampath’s mother to be, attracted the entire shahkot attention .Desai writes:

People stopped short in amazement as she
Walked down the street. How big she was!
They forgot their dealings in the almost empty
Market place. They teetered on their bicycles as
They looked around for just another sight of that
Stomach extending improbably before her like
A huge growth upon a slender tree (HGO4).

Kulfi being a glutton, “Meal after meal of just rice and lentils could not begin to satisfy the hunger that grows inside kulfi” (HG05). Kulfi’s creative mind thought of making different food preparations: ladyfingers were flavoured with tamarind and coriander. She thought of chopping and bubbling, of frying, slicing, stirring and grating. All these skills came handy to kulfi later when she served the Baba, who was merely her son before his reincarnation.

After years of failure at school, failure at work, of spending his days in the tea stalls and singing to himself in the public gardens, sampath chawala was becoming a headache for his family. Mr R.K.Chawala(father of Sampath Chawala) felt his son has been progressing steadily in the wrong direction instead of trying to work his way upwards, he started on a downward climb and now he is almost as close to the bottom as he could ever be. But sampath’s grandmother believes:

“The world is round”, “wait and see! Even if it appears
He is going downhill, he will come up out on the other side.”
Yes, on top of the world. He is just taking the larger route (HGO 26).

No one believed her, until one day the prediction actually came true. The metamorphosis took place when sampath chawala lost his menial job at the post office after performing an important cross dressing strip-tea seat his boss’s daughter’s wedding. Confined to his house in disgrace, he ran away during his family’s absence. While travelling in a bus he thought how he was leaving the world, a world that made its endless revolutions towards nothing. His heart was caught in a thrall of joy and fear. He decided to duck the mundane queries of a co-travelling old crone. When the bus halted momentarily, Sampath raced into the wilderness towards an old orchard visible far up the slope. He climbed on an ancient tree and settled among the leaves. The town has a mixed culture of traditional Indian social norms and of modern life, wherein the runaway sampath chawala, who just wants to be left alone, is forced into being a holy man in spite of himself.
Later, despite the persistent requests and persuasion from the members of his family, Sampath refused to come down from the tree. He had decided to remain there forever. People called him a monkey Baba or Tree Baba because of his fondness for monkeys who joined him on the tree and because dwelling place was the guava tree. He started giving sermons in the guava tree. The press reported; according to popular speculation, he is one of an unusual spiritual nature, his child-like ways, being coupled with unfathomable wisdom. The unfathomable wisdom came in an inspired moment of self-preservation. During his days at the post office, he spent up his time reading other people’s mail to get some kick out of their personal lives and liven up his drab existence. Therefore, he knew people’s secrets which devotees mistook for his clairvoyance or his super human power and showered all kinds of respect and veneration on him.

In the orchard, we see the isolation, the air of invisibility associated with kulfi and Sampath, flower and bloom into what become a kind of artistic genius, like magic to the town’s people, yet their own means of survival. Both kulfi and sampath are, in a sense, traders in the commodity of the unseen, kulfi buys her life’s purpose with the preparation of lavish meals exclusively for sampath, made with ingredients hidden and mysterious to the rest of the world. It was not long before Mr. Chawala saw the commercial possibilities of having a holy man in the family: Sampath might make his family’s fortune. They could be reach! ---How many men of unfathomable wisdom possessed bank accounts? What an opportunity had arisen out of nowhere? And pretty soon the guava orchard became latest stop along the spiritual tourism trail.

The Baba loved the monkeys, who joined him on the top. He liked their company, their pranks and felt absolutely at home when they played around him. Being incarnation of the Hindu god hanuman, they commanded immunity as well as respect, being our ancestors; they were seen as primeval creatures- an important link between the past and the present. When the devotees offered bottles of liquor to the Baba, though he did not drink at all, the monkeys tasted it and took a liking for alcohol. Subsequently, the monkeys turned alcoholic and posed a threat to the devotees’ conglomeration as well as to sampath’s and his family camping at the foot of the tree. Sampath’s father, who had been exploiting his son’s new role of a messiah to his financial and social advantage, felt threatened by the monkey business and approached the District Collector and the top officials to make it clear that it was their responsibility to do something about this disruption to sanctity and peace in shahkot (HGO132). They worked comically at cross purposes to confound the scene completely. However, things took a bizarre turn when sampath Baba magically disappeared right in front of everyone’s eyes:

They looked here .They looked there. Up and down the guava tree.
In the neighbouring trees. In the bushes. Behind the rocks.
They started up into the branches again again, into the undisturbed
Composition of leaves and fruits bubbling up and down.
Its painfully empty cot. But wait! Upon the cot lay a guava,
a single guava that was much , much bigger than the others:
rounder, star-based, weathered. It was surrounded by
the silver langurs , who stared at it with their intent charcoal faces.
On one side was a brown mark, rather like a birthmark--- (HGO207).

The magic Baba, perhaps attained nirvana, The cinema monkey who had a penchant for young women, picked up the fruit himself before anybody had time to move and, calm-eyed and wise, holding it close to his chest , with the other monkeys following in a band, he leapt from the guava tree’s branches and boundary away. Kiran Desai’s magic realism raises question about the Baba’s real identity. The way the monkey carried away the fruit,’ holding it close to his chest ‘, suggests “the fruit ‘to be a dead monkey. Who did Baba belong to? The monkeys or to us humans? Or, is it irrelevant to raise such an issue? (Sharma, 124). In the whole absurd and satirical drama, a distinguished spy of the Atheist Society was
made to look comic. Determined to expose the “fake” Baba, he was jeered at and pursued by everyone the Chawala and the devotees, with no support from any quarter. May be Desai purposely wanted the irrational to triumph over the rational. The book has a great sense of humour, a strong regional flavour and minute delineation of characters from daily life. The ending, though may seem contrived, is appropriate for such a novel, which helps to retain some amount of mysticism about it and also sustain its magic realism style, which also has a sprinkle of social realism in it. At the outset it may seem simple but on the closer observation is a microcosm for humanity. It depicts the eternal struggle for personal space (“the relief of space”, 78), the human tendency to make profits out of any situation and the eternal pursuit of happiness by all their own different ways”. As Charta Banerjee Divakaruni says, the novel is

A delicious blend of humour and magic,
hilarity and wisdom –and unexpected poetry.
Kiran Desai’s language will continue to
delight you after you turn the last page (Amazon. Com)

CONCLUSIONS

Kiran Desai’s debut novel, Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard, made the author an instant success at the age of twenty-seven. She is the voice of a younger generation of Indian writers who write in English, many of whom live in self-exile. Indeed, many expatriate Indian novelists have gained international attention, including salmon Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Anita Desai (Kiran Desai’s mother). India is home to many religious groups, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. It also has a history political strife among those gropes, exacerbated by the interference of British colonialism and modern globalisation. Desai, like other Indian writers in English, combines these elements of India’s traditions and history with a secular emphasis on storytelling. Her work explores the toll that these cultural divides have taken on India’s population. Desai’s work is known for its rich and colourful language, and detailed presentation of setting and character. The contemporary ‘English –language writer’ of Indian origin employ different techniques and elements in their fiction. It happens very often that a particular novelist employs different techniques and approaches his novel from a new angle in each new fiction of his. Hullabaloo in the guava Orchard is truly a powerful post-colonial novel, in which Desai clearly presents the technique of magic realism. This novel is about a maladroit protagonist Sampath Chawala. Being disgusted with the worldly life, he runs away from home to take refuge in the guava orchard, at the top of a guava tree. There he mistaken to be a ‘Baba’ the event that follows are hilarious, highly imaginative and full of fantasy. In a light comic satire, Desai introduces social problems in her novel. Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard is a light-hearted work told in the faux-naive style of the literary folktale.

REFERENCES