
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Long Journey to Freedom: An Interpretation of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* from the Perspective of Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard is the debut work of the 2006 Man Booker Prize winner Kiran Desai. There are many discussions on the novel from the perspective of ecocriticism, but existentialism in the work has received less attention. This article intends to start with Sartre's existentialism, expounding how the protagonist Sampath lives in an absurd world, gets rid of the control of others and seeks the freedom he desires in his heart. This paper believes that by shaping Sampath's image of pursuing freedom, Kiran Desai embodies his exposure to the absurd society of India and her yearning for spiritual freedom.

KEYWORDS

Kiran Desai, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Existentialism

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1. Introduction

Kiran Desai is a contemporary Indian-American female writer. In 1998, Desai published her first novel, titled *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, which was based on a story she read in a newspaper about an Indian sage who lived in a tree for many years until his death. The novel tells the seemingly absurd story of Sampath, who was born in an unnamed town in heavy rain. When he was in his twenties, his father tried to get him a position as a civil servant, but Sampath wasn't satisfied. When he conflicts with his leader and loses his job, he chooses to climb a guava tree, and no one can persuade him to come down. Surprisingly, Sampath uttered a lot of "strange words" on the tree, but people under the tree praised him as a saint. He became a "god" among the people, worshipped by millions of people, and he never wanted to return to real life. The end of the novel describes a chaotic monkey hunt, and the protagonist, Sampath, seems to be overwhelmed and merged with the guava. Upon publication, the novel received high praise from many authorities. An excerpt from it was selected for a special issue of Indian fiction in *The New Yorker*, and the editor-in-chief of the magazine commented that Desai is a keen-eyed allegorist whose portrayal of small-town culture hits people's hearts directly.

Existentialism is the most representative trend of thought in the first half of the 20th century. After the economic crisis and World War I, philosophers such as Heidegger in Germany, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus in France were deeply concerned about the chaos of the world and the emptiness of the spirit and regarded themselves as "outsiders" in the human society, thus giving birth to existentialism, which boasts of individual life, existence and freedom. Existentialism is a very broad philosophical school, mainly including three categories: theistic existentialism, atheistic existentialism, and humanitarian existentialism. As a pioneer of atheistic existentialist theory, Nietzsche put forward the slogans "God is dead" and "revalue everything". However, the founding father of existentialism should be Heidegger, who formalized the concept of existentialism in his book *Being and Time*. As a student of Heidegger and deeply influenced by the philosophy of Nietzsche, Sartre abandoned religious mysticism and formed his self-contained philosophical thought, becoming the master of existentialism. Sartre's existentialism proposes three main principles:

“existence precedes essence”, “the world is absurd, life is painful”, and “free choice”. This article will discuss *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* from three aspects: “The Absurdity of the World”, “Hell is Other People”, and “Freedom and Responsibility”.

2. Literature Review

Most of the research on Kieran Desai at home and abroad focuses on her second novel, *Inheritance of the Loss*, because it has won many awards and high popularity, and it is a classic example of cultural hybridity. In fact, although *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* focuses on the lives of small people in a small town, many important philosophical propositions, such as the meaning of life, can be inspired by these ordinary experiences. Some scholars believe that the novel is a global text. For example, Fehskens examines the impact of globalization on Indian society in terms of the acceptance of and resistance to the products of multinational corporations like Coca-Cola by the people of a small town (13). Some scholars also analyzed from the perspective of ecology, such as Kavitharaj, by describing the guava garden where Sampath fled from tranquility to noise, expressing her embarrassment on environmental issues and reminding people that they should pay attention to the protection of the natural environment in real life (226). There are not many domestic studies on the novel. The more representative one is Lin Jinglan’s study of the restraint and resistance of the crazy woman Kulfi in the patriarchal society from the perspective of feminism, which reflects Kieran Desai’s deep sympathy for women of his own nation (33). This article will start from Sartre’s existentialism and explore how the protagonist, Sampath sees the absurdity of the world he lives in, chooses to climb a guava tree, and finally integrates with nature. Sampath’s inner confusion and suffering and his later choices all reflect the viewpoint of existential philosophy, and his life reflects its meaning in the struggle against fate.

3. The Absurdity of the World

Sartre’s existentialism starts from the absurdity to explore the life experience of individuals in the absurd living situation. What “absurdity” expresses is a sense of strangeness to oneself, a sense of disgust and powerlessness to the outside world, a sense of loneliness experienced in relationships with others, and a sense of distress in real life, etc. These experiences of oneself, of others, and of the world all converge in Sartre’s eyes as “disgust”. He sees absurdity not as an idea but as something one experiences personally, something one can feel and which is difficult to eliminate. It is absurd that we are born, and it is absurd that we die. The world is absurd, and life is painful. The objective world is a purposeless structure of self-existence into which man is thrown, and man’s existence is only “born without reason, perpetuated by weakness, and dying by chance” (Sartre, 160). Man does not know why he exists, thus creating loneliness, anxiety and confusion about the absurd world.

In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Sampath is foreshadowed before he is even born as being thrown into an alien, dystopian world. While his mother, Kulfi, was still pregnant with him, the small town of Shahkot faced the hottest summer days in the country. Newspapers carried all sorts of speculations about the cause of the high temperature and plans for rain. It has been speculated that “Iraq attempts to steal monsoon by deliberately creating low pressure over desert provinces and deflecting winds from India” (Desai, 1). Sampath’s father, Mr. Chawla, also submitted to the Forestry Department a detailed proposal for planting and mowing grass and trees in intricate patterns for rain. The frantic, useless comments are as absurd and unbearable as the drought Shahkot is going through. Sampath was born in the long-awaited heavy rain, and the residents of Shahkot looked forward to him as joyously and earnestly as rain after a long drought. But Sampath seemed so different, out of tune with the world around him. He relied on his father to arrange a job as a civil servant in a post office, but the job did not satisfy him. Just because the daughter of the director of the post office is going to hold a wedding, the daily work in the post office has to be stopped to make way for the wedding, “this is customary office protocol” (Desai, 32). Sampath can’t see the meaning and value of his work and just wants to escape these disgusting daily routines. The external absurd world has already existed, and he is powerless to change the established rules and facts, and the only thing he can grasp is his own consciousness.

In his relationships with others, Sampath has not experienced equal communication. The family did not understand him. Mr. Chawla was always towering over Sampath as if showing his power as the head of the family. Grandma Ammaji feels sorry for her grandson’s “dementia”. His sister, Pinky, also despises Sampath for his “strange behaviors”. Sampath loves his mother, Kulfi, the most, and he thinks only his mother can understand his thoughts. But her mother was also seen as a “freak” who had inherited the family’s madness. Living in such an environment, Sampath felt extremely depressed. On countless sleepy nights, he was still awake, “propelled by a terrible feeling of panic...in a crucial show of determination, unwitnessed by anyone, he rose, ran into the living room and burst through the door that led to the roof” (Desai, 16). Sampath let his thoughts soar in the dark. But the daylight ruthlessly pulls him back to reality. He must face the accusations from his family and the tedious and boring work. He was often assigned the simplest and least important tasks, but with his clumsy working ability, he was still scolded by his leaders and ridiculed by his colleagues. So when everyone was helping the director prepare for his daughter’s wedding, he ignored his assigned work and hid in a corner to peek at other people’s letters. At the wedding, he ran naked into the fountain as if by some kind of inspiration and lost his job finally. In his social relationship with others, Sampath is like an “outsider”. He cannot integrate into others and society and hides in the absurdity, only feeling lonely and depressed.

Although Sampath exists in an absurd world, others cannot understand his words and deeds, but he is not a machine without his own consciousness, and his thoughts are incompatible with the outside world. At the wedding of the director's daughter, he searched and wandered around the house as he wished, "he felt a sudden sharp longing, a craving for an imagined world, for something he'd never known but felt deep within himself" (Desai, 38). But the intensity made Sampath a public embarrassment and fueled the perception that he had inherited his mother's madness. Sampath was very disgusted when faced with accusations from his family members, "he felt as if they had conspired to build a net about him, what with all their yelling and screaming, to catch him and truss him up forever" (Desai, 43). "It was a prison he had been born into. The one time he had a little bit of fun, he was curtailed and punished...And he wanted them in large swathes, in days that were clear stretches he could fill with as little as he wished" (Desai, 43-44). It is fair to say that Sampath's pursuit surpassed the material accumulation and external vanity reputation pursued by his family. He doesn't care about the choice of lunch; he doesn't care about other people's worldly prejudices; what he thinks about is how he exists in this world. He has long been tired of the absurd life day after day, and he wants to escape and pursue the meaning of his existence.

4. Hell is Other People

"Hell is other people" is a classic line from Sartre's 1943 play, *No Exit*, and a key proposition of Sartre's existentialist philosophy. In this drama, we can deeply feel the deterioration of the relationship between others and the "self" and the threat of others to the "self". The three ghosts torment each other in hell, and finally, the protagonist, Carlson, shouts, "...So this is hell. I never thought... In your impression, there should be sulfur, a raging fire, and iron bars used to burn people in hell...Ah! What a big joke! No iron bars are needed; hell is other people." (Sartre, 283) Different from the hell in religious mythology, the hell that Sartre refers to has nothing to do with the bad external environment but is a spiritual hell constructed by self and others. Hell is other people, "It doesn't mean that others will use cruel means to abuse my body, but it means that I can't resist other people's restrictions on my freedom, and I can't get rid of the threat of other people's essentialization of me, causing my existence to fall into endless troubles. (Li, 223)" As a being for itself, man has the right to control his own freedom of consciousness. Under any conditions, man has the autonomy to choose. When someone else's eyes fall on me and look at me, I am seen by others, and I will be changed. This is because I become an "existence for otherness" under the gaze of others, just like an "in-itself", an "object of others" who has lost its freedom and is fixed, becoming something like a thing of "otherness" (Du, 203). A considerable number of people in the world are living in hell because they rely too much on other people's judgments, and they feel unbearable to others' comments on them, but they don't want to change.

The relationship between Sampath and his family and neighbors in *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* just confirms the proposition that "hell is others". Sampath has been living in the arrangement of his family, and he is gazed at by his family all the time. Sampath was unable to find a job after graduation, and his classmates found jobs one after another, even those with the same grades as him, but he was the only one who was still hanging around and enjoying his days until Mr. Chawla found him a post in the post office. Every morning, Mr. Chawla looked at his son with a blank expression and always wanted to give him a lecture, "When your boss speaks to you, stand up always-there is no harm in showing respect and say: 'I will see to it right now, sir.'" (Desai, 25) Mr. Chawla had often compared Sampath to himself in his youth, and thought his son bad in every way, "ever since he was born, this boy has been progressing steadily in the wrong direction. Instead of trying to work his way upward, he started on a downward climb, and now he is almost as close to the bottom as he could ever be" (Desai, 26). Surrounded by his father's cynicism all the time, Sampath gave up hope for the absurd life and followed the family's arrangements. Until he is fired for losing his composure at the director's wedding, his family's patience with him is at an extreme, everyone yells and screams at him, and Sampath, unable to continue to endure such a life, flees alone to a guava orchard in the suburbs. But as a social creature, how can human beings escape the relationship with others? His family tracked down where he was within days. They worked together to persuade Sampath to go home, and even the younger Pinky thought that the whole family was ashamed of him; they called a doctor and found him a wife in the hope that he would change his mind, but Sampath clung to his hard-won freedom and was determined to stay on the guava tree. Sitting in a tree, Sampath uses the letters he has read in the post office to reveal the secrets of the watchers, and the people are so shocked that they hail him as a "priest". And Mr. Chawla saw a business opportunity in it and took his whole family to live in the guava orchard again to make money by using Sampath to preach on the tree. Sampath's freedom is still limited, and Mr. Chawla often "guides" Sampath for profit. "You had better start learning some philosophy and religion... people will soon get tired if you cannot converse on a deeper level. (Desai, 127)" It didn't matter if Sampath was at home or in the guava orchard, his father's mind was always a shadow, and he wanted nothing more than to be free and alone, but he was always shrouded in his father's shadow. For Sampath, his family, especially his father, Mr. Chawla, is hell on the path of his quest to find himself.

The gossip of the townspeople makes up the public opinion of the small community in which Sampath lives, and this puts Sampath under the gaze of others. Since Sampath was born on a day when the inhabitants of Shahkot were rejoicing over the arrival of rain, people believe that "[Sampath] was destined for greatness, that the world, large and mysterious beyond Shahkot, had taken notice of him. (Desai, 12)" According to Sartre's existential philosophy, "existence precedes essence"; as a being for itself, it is the free choice of human consciousness that defines his essence. So no one can define Sampath before Sampath has chosen and acted in

the world. It can be assumed that this is the neighbors' best wishes for Sampath, but the results that others presuppose often do not satisfy them. After people discovered Sampath's mediocrity and incompetence in work and life, they all sighed. After becoming a highly respected "priest", even though his identity has changed, all the behaviors that would be defined as weird that happen to ordinary people will have a reasonable explanation because of his status, and Sampath is still afraid of other people's intervention. He can boast to the ordinary people under the tree, but when he encounters the police, he is no longer calm, and when he thinks of the scene in which he was once caught by the police while riding his bicycle on the street, he can only fearfully avoid the police's questions and stare blankly at the tree. When the monkeys made havoc in the guava orchard, everyone enthusiastically came up with ideas to get rid of the monkeys in order to protect the place where Sampath was preaching, without any regard for Sampath's thoughts. In fact, the sermon was just an interlude of misadventure, not Sampath's intention, and he and the monkeys got along well with each other, seemingly blending harmoniously with nature. But people are only concerned with their own needs and don't think about destroying the serenity that Sampath has gone to so much trouble to find. Sampath has been constrained by others and overwhelmed. He found that the guava garden had also become a place he once hated.

Of course, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is not a novel that only describes the dark side of the relationship between self and others. As Sampath had always felt that his mother knew him best, when Sampath climbed the guava tree and did not want to come down, Kulfi felt that she had some kind of connection with her son and simply said, "Let him be," rather than forcefully asking him to come down. The younger sister, Pinky, once hated and despised Sampath very much, but later she also realized that her brother was driven by fate, fragile character and the inescapable pressure of life, so he had no choice but to climb a tree to escape this suffering world. Sartre is not completely hopeless about the relationship between people. As others are important, many people completely listen to the ideas of others and confine themselves to hell. In fact, as long as one has the courage to take up the weapon of free choice, people can break through the shackles of hell.

5. Freedom and Responsibility

Sartre emphasized the importance of freedom and eulogized human freedom all his life. He even believed that human existence and freedom are equally important. "Existence precedes essence" is the first principle of existential philosophy. It shows that there is no so-called fatalism for human beings. The essence of human beings is neither determined by God nor by others but is created by one's own free will and free actions. It is the man himself who decides what kind of man he becomes. "What makes a coward is not that he is cowardly by nature, not that he has a cowardly heart, much less a cowardly nature. What makes a coward is his own behavior. (Feng, 31)" Human freedom precedes and makes possible the essence of man. On this basis, Sartre established his view of humanitarian freedom. Man is born free, which is his nature, and is the fundamental difference between man and things. The autonomy of human beings to make choices is central to Sartre's view of freedom. Not only is there freedom of ideas, but man also has the power of free choice in his actions. But Sartre also points out that with free choice comes the responsibility to bear the consequences of that choice. "Man is responsible for the world as a way of being and for himself. (Sartre, 671)" Sartre illustrates the responsibility that free choice entails in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. First and foremost, it is the responsibility of the individual that free choice raises us from "being" to "essence", and we define our own existence through our choices and actions. Secondly, there is the responsibility to society and even to mankind. The choices and actions made by individuals after self-awakening cannot be separated from the larger context of society and will inevitably affect their relationship with others. That's why freedom from all consequences is not true freedom; it's only true freedom if you experience the freedom to choose, to act, and to take responsibility.

People go through a lot of options in their lives, some of which are active choices and some of which are forced by the situation. On a personal level, human choice is absolutely free, and no one can interfere with another person's consciousness and sway their choices. From a social perspective, people's free choice is relative and will be constrained by social, moral norms, public order customs, etc. People are responsible for the consequences of their choices. So human choice embodies the unity of freedom and responsibility. In *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, Sampath defines his essence with his own choices and actions. The choices Sampath makes in his life also show a lack of personal responsibility. When he chose to accept his father's help in working at the post office, he was supposed to fulfill his responsibilities as an employee. But he made a mess of his work. When everyone was busy, he put aside his work and secretly read other people's letters during working hours. This made him both fail to do the job he was supposed to do and violate the employee's work ethic. He chose to climb the guava tree, never to come down again when he couldn't stand the absurdity and meaninglessness of his life. He only wanted to escape the disgusting family, work, and study, and he didn't care about his social responsibilities as a family member, worker, etc., at all. It took days for his family to find his hiding place, but he also refused to come down from the tree and return to his old life. Although Sampath made a brave choice to let his spirit get a little respite in the secular world, he didn't consider how he lived in the tree, which showed from another aspect that he was not responsible for himself.

Sampath also carries a sense of indifference to social matters. He announced the secrets of the spectators in public with the help of letters secretly read in the post, which is actually irresponsible to the public. Although this move made him a "priest", it cannot

erase the embarrassment he caused the client. The climax of the novel occurs after the visit of the monkeys, and although Sampath gets along well with the monkeys and even becomes their leader for a time, the destruction that the monkeys wreak on the crowd and the guava orchard cannot be ignored. The monkeys attacked people, coaxed food brought by them, and even went to the stores on the street to steal alcohol, returning drunk and disruptive to the guava orchard. The noise in the guava garden was caused by this, and everyone was trying to drive away the monkeys and return to tranquility. But it wasn't the monkeys that Sampath hated; he was even more tired of the continuous and noisy crowd. He neither wanted to come down from the tree to live in the temple Mr. Chawla had described nor could he do anything about the coming monsoon rains and even less about the noisy monkeys and crowds. So he can only let himself go, get out of these bad things, only focus on his own survival, and don't care about the loss of control of the situation and the harm people suffer. In the end, he chose to merge with the guava in order not to fall back into the mundane world again.

While Sampath seems to have all sorts of responsibilities missing, it's actually not surprising in light of his choices. He chooses inner peace, and that necessarily involves shedding some of the noise he doesn't want to put up with. Sampath's understanding of responsibility is revealed when he answers a question from an audience member. A round-faced man asked the Sampath in the tree, "I am being overtaken by spiritual matters. How can I keep my mind on my responsibilities?" Sampath answered, "If you talk to a young girl as she stands before the mirror, it is like talking to a deaf person. And can you keep a moth from flying into the lantern by saying she should worry about her three children?" (Desai, 75-76) Sampath knows what is important to him, he just has to take responsibility for his life and be blameless in his choices, so it's not surprising that he eschews some of his family's and society's sense of responsibility in his quest for freedom.

6. Conclusion

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard depicts the absurd world in which Sampath lives, the mind control of others he encounters, and the choices and actions he takes in pursuit of freedom, all of which exemplify Sartre's existentialist philosophy. Existentialism not only allows us to recognize the reality of the world but also encourages people to take the initiative and make positive choices and actions in order to create their own essence. Even though the objective world cannot be changed, people can change themselves. Sampath is able to see the absurdity of the outside world and the constraints placed upon him, and in time makes his own choice to go to the guava orchard. Despite the fact that the world in the garden has become a world he detests again because of various factors, he does not choose to put up with it but rather end it all by merging with nature in the midst of the clamor. Sampath listened to his inner voice, and his various choices made him a freedom fighter against constraints. However, this essay discusses Sampath's plight and transformation primarily in terms of external causes, the internal ones of which also deserve a more in-depth study. Through her first novel, Kiran Desai shows the preciousness of spiritual freedom in contemporary society by depicting Sampath's difficult quest for freedom, which can be of some help to anyone in a predicament.

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