

## Wise men in trees: dialogues between Kiran Desai and Italo Calvino

**Abstract:** The first book published by Indian-born writer Kiran Desai, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1999), received mixed critical responses and only caught the public's attention after the author was awarded the Man-Booker Prize in 2006 for the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The reader who is familiar with Calvino cannot help noticing the similarities between the plot of *Hullabaloo* and that of *The Baron in the Trees*, as both novels tell the story of young men who decide to resist the impositions of family and society by living in trees and vowing never to touch the ground again. This paper compares and contrasts Calvino's and Desai's novels focusing especially on the significance of the protagonists' withdrawal from society; the targets of the social and literary critique presented in each novel; the use of irony and of a non-realist approach to the narrative; and, finally, the light tone of both narratives, even when dealing with serious issues.

**Keywords:** Kiran Desai, Italo Calvino, the individual and society, lightness.

**Resumo:** O primeiro livro publicado pela escritora de origem indiana, Kiran Desai, em 1999, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (*Rebulição no pomar de goiabeiras*), foi recebido pela crítica com alguma reserva e apenas chamou a atenção do público depois que a autora foi agraciada com o Man-Booker Prize em 2006, pelo romance *The Inheritance of Loss* (*A herança da perda*). Para o leitor de Italo Calvino ficam evidentes as semelhanças entre o enredo de *Hullabaloo* e o de *O barão nas árvores*, pois ambos narram a história de dois jovens que buscam resistir às imposições da família e da sociedade e, para isso, decidem viver nas árvores e prometem nunca mais pôr os pés no chão. Este trabalho propõe uma leitura do romance de Desai à luz do livro de Calvino, focalizando em especial o significado do afastamento dos protagonistas em relação à sociedade; os objetos da crítica social e literária empreendida pelos dois textos; a utilização da ironia e de uma abordagem não-realista da narrativa; e, finalmente, o tom leve que caracteriza ambos os autores, mesmo ao lidar com questões mais sérias.

**Palavras-chave:** Kiran Desai, Italo Calvino, indivíduo e sociedade, leveza.

On an interview to the journal *Boldtype* in 1999, Kiran Desai<sup>1</sup> traces the genesis of her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, published in the previous year, to a story she had read in *Times* of India and also

heard from other people, about an Indian hermit who had lived in a tree for a large part of his life. However, readers of Italo Calvino's fiction cannot help associating Desai's book with *The Baron in the Tree* (*Il barone rampante*), published in 1957 as the third novel in the trilogy *Our Ancestors* (*I nostri antenati*), which marks his turn away from the neorealist writing Calvino pursued in his early career, as well as from his connections with the Italian Communist Party. Though Kiran Desai does not acknowledge her debt to Calvino, the Italian writer is certainly one of her "precursors", along with other writers she has quoted as her favorite, among them Kazuo Ishiguro, Kenzaburo Oe, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Juan Rulfo and R. K. Narayan (Desai, 1999) – "a polyglot family tree", to use Salman Rushdie's definition of his own literary "parents" (Rushdie, 1991, p. 21). "[I]t is one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents", Rushdie observes in "Imaginary Homelands" (Rushdie, 1991, pp. 20-21). Kiran Desai, another Indian-born "international writer", would probably agree with her countryman.

Salman Rushdie describes Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees* as "one of the most haunting images of rebellion, of determined nay-saying, that exists in the literature of this rebellious century" (Rushdie, 1999, p. 256). The novel recounts the story of Baron Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò 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 again—a promise he keeps until he dies. Moving from tree to tree, Cosimo watches the eighteenth century pass by, leading a life that is as similar as possible to the lives of his contemporaries: in his arboreal homes, he studies, reads, writes, hunts, communicates with his family and friends, falls in love, fights, and corresponds with the great European thinkers of the time, such as Voltaire, and even meets Napoleon himself. Cosimo keeps his vow until his death in old age: feeling very ill, he is saved from being buried in the ground by a *deus-ex-machina*, as he grabs the rope trailing from a balloon that is flying towards the sea and disappears forever.

The similarities to the plot of Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* are pretty evident. Sampath Chawla, an eccentric twenty-year-old boy living in small-town India is a failure both at school and at work. When he loses his job at the postal services, he runs away from home and finds refuge in a guava orchard, where he is turned into a holy man. Like Calvino's Baron, Sampath vows never to set foot on the ground again; he lives in the trees of the orchard, which is gradu-

ally transformed into a holy place, until circumstances force him to flee. Jumping from tree to tree, Sampath disappears forever in the woods, following the monkeys that had invaded the area. Other similarities between the two novels can be pointed out, such as the eccentricity characterizing the protagonists' families, especially in relation to cooking habits: in *The Baron in the Trees*, Battista, Cosimo's sister, is ultimately responsible for driving her brother away from home, due to her habit of killing and cooking animals usually viewed as repugnant. Her counterpart in *Hullabaloo* is Kulfi, Sampath's mother, equally wild in her cooking; however, contrary to what happens in Calvino's novel, her strange dishes are greatly appreciated by her son.

In both novels, the protagonists were raised within quite unconventional families, which gradually come to accept their unusual behavior and choices. Cosimo's father is an impoverished aristocrat, while his mother, the daughter of a general, has been raised in the battlefields and army barracks, but can only relax by means of her very feminine taste for needlework. Besides Battista, the wild cook, Cosimo has a younger brother, Biagio, who leads a rather ordinary existence but, out of brotherly love and admiration for his uncommon sibling, acts as the narrator of his adventures – a topic that will be developed later. In *Hullabaloo*, Sampath has a sister who, contrary to her mother and brother, is quite down to earth and, like her father, more interested in social and economic gains than in individual freedom.

In view of the similarities between the plots of the two novels, one is led to ask what would be the significance of making a home in the trees for each character. Moreover, what are the issues raised by each plot? To what effect do Calvino and Kiran Desai resort to the protagonists' withdrawal from the ordinary patterns of social life to an arboreal existence?

Let us consider Calvino first. In his well-known introduction to the trilogy *Our Ancestors*, Calvino affirms that in *The Baron in the Trees* he wanted to discuss "the path toward a non-individualistic wholeness to be attained by means of faithfulness to individual self-determination" (Calvino 1960, p. 409). In other words, the main focus of the novel would be man's freedom of choice as well as the search for both individual and social commitment. In one of the texts collected in *Hermit in Paris*, Calvino argues that this novel deals with the problem of "finding the right distance to be present and at the same time detached" (Calvino, 2003, p. 184). As we know, Calvino's comments on his own writings tended to be playfully misleading and probably meant to confuse his readers rather than to help them understand his apparently

simple, yet very complex, narratives. Therefore, to view this novel as an instance of the right balance between individual freedom and social commitment would mean to overlook the irony involved in the narrative. In *The Baron*, it is crucial for the reader to be aware of who is telling the story so as to avoid the pitfall of considering the narrator as a mouthpiece for Calvino himself. First, differently from the author, Biagio is an 18<sup>th</sup> century gentleman, deeply steeped in the writings of the European Enlightenment. It is Biagio, then, that recounts this story by focusing on the choice between the solitary life and that of social commitment; apparently the novel follows conventional reason (based on only one option), but the narrative is later complicated by the presentation of several options<sup>2</sup>, thus teasing and playing with the reader, as Calvino often does. Thus, the novel should not be read simplistically as a *conte philosophique* within the framework of the Enlightenment. Biagio's naivety and brotherly love contribute to turn him into an unreliable narrator, who believes in Cosimo's effective social role and in the optimistic perspective of Rousseau, according to which a retreat to nature would be a healthy choice, leading to the creation of the natural man. The choice of point of view is then important to understand the novel: although Biagio is the principal narrator, he acts more like an editor or collector of stories. Actually, he does not witness most of the adventures experienced by his brother and relies mostly on the reports and even the gossip of the townspeople. Biagio puts the stories together, relying on the words of others, and exposes the narrative's fictionality by insisting on the truth of these unlikely, absurd stories. The narrator never questions the fact that his stories are no more than versions of other stories, presented as facts; and neither does he question Cosimo's absurd decision to live in trees. Therefore, in *The Baron in the Trees*, the use of very complex narrative techniques and the inclusion of philosophical issues contrasts with the very simple style of a narrative that is clearly metafictional – actually all of these elements characterize most of Calvino's writings. In the novel, reading and storytelling constitute prominent features; moreover, this is a text that is set in the context of other 18<sup>th</sup> century texts (both real and imaginary), such as *Clarissa*, *L'Encyclopédie*, *La Nouvelle Eloïse*, among other books that the characters read, allude to or comment on. Echoes of other books can be easily perceived: *L'Orlando Furioso* acts as a subtext in the sections describing Cosimo's descent into insanity after he is abandoned by his lover Viola; moreover, as Viola herself points out, Cosimo acts like Robinson Crusoe, who, on his first night on the island, sleeps in a tree (Carlton 1984, p. 195). Cosimo himself can be

viewed as “a literal representation of a literary notion”, since “[h]is point of view is separate, above and different from that of the people on the ground”, as Jill Carlton noted (Carlton, 1984, p. 196), indicating that one must be at a certain distance to have a better view of reality. However, this is only deceptively so: as a major storyteller, Cosimo helps create his image of the complete gentleman – “l'uomo completo”, as Calvino puts it in the Preface to *Our Ancestors* (Calvino, 1960, p. xv) – socially committed but keeping a distance from closer involvement with others. A more intent reading will reveal, though, that Cosimo's choice results from his own sense of “singularity and solitude” (Calvino, 1960, xiv), from his search of personal freedom rather than from the interest in the good of society. Though he sometimes interacts with different social groups and eventually helps them to improve their lives, “Cosimo has opted for a lonely course of life not because it clearly reflects the *best* way to live, but only the least painful”, as Constance Markey puts it (Markey, 1980, p. 60). Unable to choose between involved social life and contemplation, “Cosimo retreats from both”: he chooses not to choose and leads a “compromise arboreal existence” (Markey, 1980, p. 61).

Given these considerations, I believe that reading *The Baron* as an allegorical representation of the writer in society is too restrictive and simplistic. The ironic tone of the narrative indicates that the novel constitutes a parody of the 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism as well as of the literature resulting from it, in which knowledge is often dissociated from the flow of life. The targets of the criticism are, then, especially “the literary conventions” of the century, “rather than the social ones”, as Markey pointed out (Markey, 180, p. 199). However, as a consequence of the importance of intertextuality in the novel, it takes an informed reader to perceive all the subtleties involved in Calvino's narrative technique.

Compared to *The Baron*, Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* presents a simpler form of narrative: the story is told by a third-person narrator, much as in traditional storytelling or in the technique used by short story writers like Narayan<sup>3</sup> – actually, Shakhnot echoes Malgudi in its evocation of small-town India. This more straightforward narrative certainly lacks the complexity of Calvino's multiple narrators; however, both novels follow the pattern of oral storytelling. The main difference, though, is that while Calvino's narrator makes an effort to “prove” to the reader that he is telling a true story – notwithstanding its absurdity – Desai's account incorporates magic from the start, thus being openly associated with fantasy. Calvino calls the novels of his trilogy “my three lyric-epic-comic novels” (Calvino, 2003,

p. 124), a definition that would only partly be appropriate to designate *Hullabaloo*, as Desai's novel tends toward what we could call a mock-mythical mode. It starts with the extraordinary birth of the anti-hero in a setting that is both natural and magical. His mother's pregnancy is itself singular and happens during a severe drought and a period of food shortage, making her not only constantly long for unusual dishes but also, in the absence of tasty food, to feel the urge to cover the walls of her house with drawings of foods and eating scenes (Desai, 1999, pp. 7-8). Kulfi's pregnancy seemed to affect the whole town: "Kulfi, in these months, was so enormously large, she seemed to be claiming all the earth's energy for herself, sapping it dry, leaving it withered, shriveled and yellow" (Desai, 1999, p. 3). As a result, "[e]verywhere 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" (Desai, 1999, p. 7).

Sampath's birth coincides with the beginning of the rainy season and with food literally falling from the skies: "Caught in their old jamun tree, they saw a crate of Red Cross supplies that had been dropped by a Swedish relief plane befuddled by the storm in a move that must surely have been planned by the gods" (Desai, 1999, p. 11). But the boy brought to the world under apparently such auspicious circumstances grows up to be a disappointment to his family in all possible ways. Expectations are thwarted twice, for Sampath's absent-mindedness and disregard for worldly concerns do not indicate any special spiritual inclinations, but only a desire to withdraw from any social responsibilities and bonds. Unlike the Baron in Calvino's novel, Sampath is not interested in knowledge or reading, or in fulfilling a social role of any kind. Helping the community or contributing to its improvement does not even cross his mind; moreover, social interaction only occurs after the villagers eventually come to believe Sampath is a holy man living in the trees among monkeys, which are frequently viewed as sacred animals in India. In one of the few demonstrations of smartness, Sampath pretends to be able to read people's minds and to know their private affairs. Actually, he used to read the villagers' mail while he worked at the post-office, but his apparent clairvoyance did make an impression. Encouraged by his father, a former bank clerk who saw in his son an opportunity to make easy money, Sampath, dressed as a holy man, receives pilgrims for consultation and advice in the form of proverbs, poetic parables and platitudes delivered in cryptic language, such as: "If you do not weed (...) your tomato plant will not flower" (Desai, 1999, p. 75).

Mr. Chawla's exploitation of the guava orchard for religious tourism contributes to gradually turn it into a sacred place and a source of easy income as Sampath becomes a celebrity all over India. However, an invasion of alcoholic monkeys chased away from the market ends up causing the destruction of Sampath's paradise, as the authorities decide to put order on the chaos created by the monkeys and by the commercialism involved in the whole enterprise. Sampath, the "Monkey Baba", or "Tree Baba" (Desai, 1999, p. 119), then has to abandon his "hermitage" and his "devotees", and he leaves the orchard jumping from one tree to the next, never to be seen again.

Desai's novel certainly shares the irony and the playfulness characterizing Calvino; actually, she takes these elements to the extreme so as to criticize or comment on the foibles of the Indian society, such as certain forms of religiosity, the credulous creations of gurus, self-involved families, the inefficiencies of the public services, the excesses of entrepreneurialism. However, some of the issues raised are of a more existential character, like those approached by Calvino in *The Baron in the Trees*, such as life's limitations and the pressures of society. Like the Baron, 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 orchard is then opposed to the city, which stands for duty and the claustrophobic atmosphere of both the post-office, his work place, and his home, which, in the beginning of the story, is described as so "hot and stuffy" (Desai, 1999, p. 15) that he was unable to fall asleep. The withdrawal to a natural setting, then, means freedom from any social bonds:

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 toward nothing. Now it did not matter any more. His heart was caught in a thrall of joy and fear. Somehow, somewhere, he had found a crack. Bus stations and people passed by in a blur.

Rather than withdrawing to the woods in search of illumination, this would-be guru is looking for personal freedom and happiness; like the Baron, one may say 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, p. 60). Sampath's "arboreal home" then becomes "a private cocoon", which even his sister learns to appreciate:

Now, she felt, she too understood the dreadfulness of life, recognized the need to be by herself with sadness, and from this moment of realization onwards, she spent hours sitting under Sampath's tree, in a private cocoon within which she indulged her every thought, wrapping herself in endless imaginings, endless ruminations (...) (Desai, 1999, p. 110).

What would be the implications of this search for a retreat from society that ends up by contaminating several characters in the novel (not only Sampath, Kulfi and Pinky, but also the pilgrims who visit the hermitage)? Why do they seem to relish the seclusion provided by the guava orchard? Could one say that the novel indirectly comments on the position of the writer in society? The answer could be yes, especially when one thinks of the distance required to represent society critically. However, due to the very critical view of this escape from the dreariness of everyday life, one can notice a certain feeling of guilt for inhabiting a cocoon, even when it is perceived as a condition for artistic creation. This discomfort becomes even more evident in Desai's second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, which deals more directly with the issue by relating the withdrawal from society to questions of class and economic privilege. Moreover, there is another fact that should not be disregarded: like most postcolonial writers, Kiran Desai lives away from her homeland and the extreme poverty of a large part of the Indian population. Therefore, Desai's representation of these secluded, protected, places may be read as a reference to her position as a diasporic writer, who looks at her native society from a distance. Dislocation and voluntary exile are then problematized, as they become signs of privilege rather than the reason for nostalgia and homesickness.

Both *The Baron in the Trees* and *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* suggest the vulnerability of natural havens and of any attempt at retreating from society. In Calvino's novel, the woods of Penumbria, once Cosimo's home, no longer exist, as they were cut down and substituted by non-native species, whereas Sampath's grove does not resist the invasion of commercialism and the economic exploitation of false gurus. There is no escape from society and history, these two texts seem to suggest in the ironic and humorous tone characterizing both Calvino and Desai. In fact, more than the writing of very similar stories, the two authors share the same Lightness that Calvino considered to be a key element in literature in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*:

Soon I became aware that between the facts of life that should have been my raw materials, and the quick light touch I wanted for my writing, there was a gulf that cost me increasing effort to cross. Maybe I was only then becom-



ing aware of the weight, the inertia, the opacity of the world – qualities that stick to writing from the start, unless one finds some way of evading them (Calvino, pp. 3-4).

It is that “quick light touch”, pursued by Calvino throughout his career, that one can find in Kiran Desai’s approach to life and history, even when it comes to the more serious matters she approaches in *The Inheritance of Loss*.

## Notes

1. Kiran Desai, daughter of the famous Indian novelist Anita Desai, was born in India in 1971. She was educated in India until she was 14, and later in England and the United States, where she currently lives.
2. For a thorough discussion on Calvino’s approach to the difficulty posed by the need to make the right choice, see Markey, 1980.
3. R. K. Narayan (1906-2001) is one of the best known Indian writers, author of fourteen novels, five volumes of short stories, as well as of non-fiction and adaptations of Indian epics. Many of his stories take place in the imaginary town of Malgudi.

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