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## Calvino – Desai, On Freedom and Alienation. Rules and Boundaries of Life on a Tree

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Both Italo Calvino (*The Baron in the Trees*) and, much later, Kiran Desai (*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*) created an alternative life-space above ground, on the trees. In case of Calvino's character Cosimo, it is a life-long experience, we follow Cosimo from childhood to maturity in the new environment as he takes an active part in the important historical events of his new surroundings. Desai's Sampath ends up on a guava tree almost by accident, in his adult age, and does not control the repercussions of this choice. The paper will discuss the similarities and differences between the two different concepts of freedom advocated by the characters, along with the inevitable rules and boundaries attached to these utopias.

### Introduction

The two novels, very different in so many aspects – the time of creation, the environment they describe, the narrative strategies – share a substantial common denominator which represents the backbone of this paper. Namely, both protagonists, Calvino's Cosimo and Desai's Sampath, decide to spend their lives on trees. This peculiar invention allows us to consider both novels within the realms of fairy-tales,<sup>1</sup> and, regardless of the differences in the plot, to determine

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<sup>1</sup> Calvino's trilogy has been redefined continuously either as a *conte philosophique*, a modern fairy-tale or an autobiographical allegory of the writer's position in society. Kiran Desai's novel has been mostly viewed by the critics as a successful first novel, a parable or a satire of the contemporary India. We find the link between the two in the considerations about the fairy-tale element of a tree-sanctuary in Bruno Bettelheim's seminal work *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy-tales*: "The fairy-tale hero proceeds for a time in isolation [...] The hero is helped by being in touch with primitive things – a tree, an animal, nature – as the child feels more in touch with those things than most adults do." (Bettelheim 1989: 11). Gore Vidal defines this novel as a fairy-tale and a consequence of Calvino's publication of a collection of Italian

that they share a significant amount of features. The basic information on the novels provided in this introduction serve to clarify the cultural backgrounds they belong to.

Calvino's novel *The Baron in the Trees* (*Il barone rampante*) was first published in 1957, and is part of the Trilogy entitled *Our Ancestors* (*I nostri antenati*), along with two other novels, *The Cloven Viscount* (*Il visconte dimezzato*, 1952) and *The Nonexistent Knight* (*Il cavaliere inesistente*, 1959). It was written in the same year Calvino publicly left the Communist party being very disappointed and disillusioned by the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the revelation of Stalin's crimes.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the three novels are marginalized by their inclusion in children's literature is acceptable only if they are to be included among "children's" literature that has undergone serious scholarly revisions, such as *Alice in Wonderland* or *Gulliver's Travels*.

On the other hand, we find Kiran Desai's *début* novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* released in 1998, is a humorous sketch of a middle-class, small-town<sup>3</sup> in India keeping up with modern tendencies, but struggling to preserve deeply rooted tradition. The author does not acknowledge any connections with the Calvino novel, on the contrary, in an interview she states that she has more or less related to a true story published in the Indian *Times* about a hermit living on a tree.<sup>4</sup>

In order to define the realms of freedom gained by the two protagonists after climbing trees, the paper will first determine the implicit freedoms they were already enjoying, although unaware of them, as well as outline numerous boundaries, limitations and frustrations that led to the climb. Special attention will be paid to the limitations arising from the new environment.

## Socially Conditioned Freedoms and Limitations

Calvino sets the story in the landscape of his childhood, creating an imaginary town of Ombrosa<sup>5</sup> to resemble the Ligurian town of San Remo,<sup>6</sup> in the age of the

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traditional tales the previous year: "In 1956 Calvino edited a volume of Italian fables, and the local critics decided that he was true heir to Grimm. Certainly the bright, deadly fairy tale attracts him and he returned to it with *The Baron in the Trees* (1957)." (Vidal 1974)

<sup>2</sup> The Italian Mondadori edition of the novel includes a thorough biography of Italo Calvino entitled *Cronologia* containing all the above stated facts. (Calvino 1993: XXVI-XXVIII).

<sup>3</sup> Desai sets the novel in the Indian town of Shahkot (state of Punjab) thus preserving the illusion of reality of her plot.

<sup>4</sup> The information about the interview was gathered from the article *Wise men in trees: dialogues between Kiran Desai and Italo Calvino* by Eliana Lourenço de Lima Reis. The interview is available on-line in *Bold Type*, Vol. 3, 2, May 1999.

<sup>5</sup> In the presentation of the novel the author states that Ombrosa is to be placed somewhere on the Ligurian Riviera and the landscape is a re-invention based on " [...] composition, enlargement, multiplication of scattered elements of memory." (Calvino 1993: VIII-IX).

<sup>6</sup> Calvino was born on the island of Cuba, but has lived in the Ligurian town of San Remo since the age of two. This biographical detail has been politicized in the aforementioned

European Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand with this setting he manages to solve the practical issue of a quite larger forest-area necessary for his hero to “travel” around, and on the other he gets to comment on this particular time in history, that of the second half of the eighteenth century that has led to the French Revolution, but also to the Napoleonic Empire and the Restoration which followed. Moreover, this journey to the North-Italian Enlightenment period allows him to depict the decadence and sometimes silly expectations and formalities of the Italian aristocracy. The fact that the Calvinian “tree-man” is a baron and not a beggar, a low-life, or a mentally-ill person, that he is an otherwise perfectly normal member of his community,<sup>8</sup> is also important example of free-choice. The life he leads before his rebellion is not exactly the life of the 18<sup>th</sup>- century aristocratic children. As we learn at the beginning of the novel, aside from being tutored at home and being required to respect very strict rules of behaviour at meal time, Cosimo (the protagonist) and his younger brother Biagio (the narrator) enjoy all the games stereotypically associated with boys: tree-climbing, bathing in torrents, exploring the surroundings and, the most common of all, sliding down the handrails in their house. This information alone creates the impression that Cosimo’s childhood freedom is quite enviable from the point of view of any twelve-year-old boy at any time. The only obvious frustration to his otherwise happy existence comes from the character of his sister Battista. Described as the house “nun” whose only joy is cooking, she terrorizes the whole family with extravagant dishes. She is never explicitly described as deranged, a psychopath morbidly torturing animals for her own pleasure, but the novel certainly implies this.<sup>9</sup> In his article on Italo

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Gore Vidal’s article: “[...] although Calvino was brought up in San Remo, he was actually born in Cuba, a detail given by none of his American publishers; no doubt in deference to our recent attempted conquest of that unfortunate island.” (Vidal 1974)

<sup>7</sup> All the trilogy novels are set in the past. *The Cloven Viscount* narrates about a war between the Austrian and Turkish empires in 1716, while *The Nonexistent Knight* takes us to the Middle Ages and the battles during the times of Charlemagne. *The Baron in the Trees* is the only Calvinian novel that occupies a longer time-frame and represents the entire life of its main character (Barenghi 2007: 66) covering historical events such as the French Revolution and the Napoleonic conquest of Northern Italy.

<sup>8</sup> “Although he distances himself from society and withdraws to a ‘natural’ element, he does not revert to a ‘savage’ state. (This is not a Hobbesian fantasy).” (Carlton 1984: 195)

<sup>9</sup> Calvino describes her cooking as works of art: “Erano, questi piatti di Battista, delle opere di finissima orafria animale o vegetale: teste di cavolfiore con orecchie di lepre poste su un colletto di pelo di lepre; o una testa di porco dalla cui bocca usciva, come cacciasse fuori la lingua, un’aragosta rossa, e l’aragosta nelle pinze teneva la lingua del maiale come se glie l’avesse strappata. Poi le lumache: era riuscita a decapitare non so quante lumache, e le teste, quelle teste di cavallucci molli molli, le aveva infisse, credo con uno stecchino, ognuna su un bigné, e parevano, come vennero in tavola, uno stormo di piccolissimi cigni. E ancor più della vista di quei manicaretti faceva impressione pensare dello zelante accanimento che certo Battista v’aveva messo a prepararli, immaginare le sue mani sottili mentre smembravano quei corpicini d’animali.” (Calvino 1993: 11)

Calvino Salman Rushdie found it necessary to accompany the name of Battista with examples of her more than strange gastronomic endeavors: “[...] she also cooks some pâté toast, really exquisite, of rat livers; ... and some grasshoppers’ claws, ... laid on an open tart in mosaic; and pigs’ tails roasted as if they were little cakes [...]” (Rushdie 1992: 256). Much the same, John Updike in an article entitled *Metropolises of the Mind*, mentions a description of Battista’s cooking as an example for Calvino’s passion for the fantastic. (Updike 1985: 131).

From the point of view of fairy-tales, a character who cooks mysterious and unattractive concoctions is a witch. As her function in Calvino’s novel is to trigger the rebellion, her narrative faith is resolved in an unexpected marriage welcomed by the whole family, and her disappearance from the plot. Witnessing Battista’s torturing of animals the two brothers decide to free the snails from a barrel in the cellar, but, as the snails are slow (proverbially so) the boys get caught and severely punished. After three days of “prison” (a very poor diet in a secluded room), they are readmitted to the family dinner-table only to be served snails again. The family, and public in general, regard snails as a gastronomic delicacy, so the point is not in the fact that he has been served with something inedible (as this is not), but that he has been openly challenged by the evil witch and has had to suffer her revenge by means of her strongest weapon – food. Describing this event, the narrator – the younger brother Biagio – admits to have been a bit of a coward in the situation as he has eaten the snails after the parental threat. Nevertheless, the fact is that Cosimo essentially rebels against his sister, against her sophisticated revenge and nothing more. Other than the sister’s cuisine, Cosimo has had no greater problems or deprivations as it will be discussed anon.

In Desai’s novel the plot does not revolve entirely around the main character of Sampath Chawla, as in Calvino it does around the baron, but focuses on everything that is directly and indirectly connected with the “hullabaloo” created by his tree-climbing. It is a humorous fresco of the modern Indian society caught in between traditions, such as arranged marriages, everyday struggles, such as finding a good and lasting job, easing the drought-periods, feeding the family etc. The novel starts with Sampath’s birth. This very theatrical episode, accompanied by thunders, rain, food falling from the sky, all considered omens of a great man being born,<sup>10</sup> serves as a fairy-tale-like beginning of a presumably heroic enterprise. It raises the reader’s expectations just like a well-conceived commercial would, only to make the bitter contrast with the description of the grown hero, that immediately follows, even funnier. As far as the overall structure is concerned, the beginning and the ending of the novel create a fairy-tale frame coinciding with the hero’s birth and disappearance. Everything else inside this frame is deliberately average, realistic and usual. There are very few information on Sampath’s childhood and adolescence, and those that are given primarily

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<sup>10</sup> The novel is abundant with references to traditional beliefs, myths and customs that determine many of the characters’ delusions and influence their choices. With the obvious intention of creating a caricature by exaggeration, Desai draws an epic drought which ends at the moment of Sampath’s birth, conferring him an aura of holiness, of being somebody above average from the beginning of his life.

underline Sampath's total lack of academic, social or any other specific skills. Consequently, the formerly raised expectations remain unfulfilled as the reader encounters this twenty-year-old disappointment of a son. In this presentation of the character Desai allows herself to comment ironically on the fact that a boy (and not a girl) is born: "For though he might not be very plump or very fair, he was triumphantly and indisputably male." (Desai 1999: 12)

The boundaries and limitations that force Sampath to escape and climb a tree are more complex than the sole sister-problem in the *Baron*. Aside from the psychological picture of an inept who is constantly miserable because of the family expectations, we are given the image of a lazy, incompetent, nonambitious young person.<sup>11</sup> The anti-hero par excellence. His limitations are those of an average middle-class young adult: he needs to work because the family cannot support him financially, his household is too small to guarantee him privacy,<sup>12</sup> and he will eventually have to marry someone chosen by his parents. In Sampath's case, all this is made worse in the context of an extremely poor father-son relationship. His father's main frustration is that in spite of having an adult son in the house, he himself needs to provide, worry and plan for the whole family as this son cannot be entrusted with anything: "If it wasn't for me, Sampath would be sitting in a special museum for people who are a cross between potatoes and human beings." (Desai 1999: 26)

The greatest difference of opinion between the two relates to their perception of Sampath's job. His father manages to get him a job at the post office and calls it "government service",<sup>13</sup> underlining various privileges it brings, such as a steady salary and many holidays, but Sampath perceives this job as another form of imprisonment. At work, as well as in his parent's house, he is disregarded and ignored, but, unlike fairy-tale-misfits, he is very much loved by his mother and grandmother. His rebellion is quite different from Cosimo's. It is unintentional

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<sup>11</sup> The main irony in his not doing his job properly derives from the fact that instead of working he keeps reading other people's mail, which will eventually prove to be essential for his tree-man career.

<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of the novel there is a humorous description of the whole family sleeping in the same room and of Sampath climbing the roof for some rest and cool air.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the funniest parts of this novel are to be found in Desai's portraits of social stereotypes such as the perception of what a "government job" means: "Government service! People thought of afternoon siestas. Of tea boys running up and down with glasses of steamy milky tea all day long. They thought of free medicines at the dispensary and pensions. Of ration cards and telephones. Of gas connections that could be had so easily. They thought of how this was a country with many festivals and holidays. Of how the government offices closed for each one. they imagined a job where, even if your boss turned out to be unpleasant, there were always plenty of people to shout at, people whom you could shout at even louder than your boss had shouted at you. The sweeper or the messenger boy, for example." (Desai 1999: 23), or the description of the post-office "customary protocol" for the upcoming wedding of the boss's daughter: "For, of course, when it comes to a wedding, all official work should stop and the staff of any office whose boss's family is having a wedding must assist in making the appropriate arrangements." (Desai 1999: 32).

and accidental, as he sees the guava orchard from the bus, jumps off and climbs a tree not with the idea to stay there for good, but only to fulfil the immediate urge to find a quiet place to rest. The picture of Sampath the reader gains before his climbing the guava tree is that of an almost mentally challenged person, and this is in stark contrast with the sudden wisdom, clarity of ideas and actions that he will show later-on. This may well be considered as the weakest logical link in the novel.

## Trees – The Space of Freedom

In Calvino's novel *Cosimo's tree-life* occupies a much larger portion of the story. He is up already at the end of the first chapter, at the age of twelve, and stays on trees for the rest of his relatively long life (before disappearing he is said to be 65). Therefore, not only is a larger portion of the book dedicated to his tree-life, but it also describes a time-span of fifty years. Desai's Sampath climbs the guava tree at the age of twenty, after approximately one quarter of the book, but, as the plot does not concentrate on him, but on the consequences of his climbing, the time-span of the story amounts to merely a few months.<sup>14</sup>

In fairy-tale terms, aside from the already mentioned importance of the hero's need for isolation and alienation, a forest is a place of specific significance, as Bettelheim explains it:

The forest [...] symbolizes the place in which inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be. (Bettleheim 1989: 93).

Both these novels certainly confirm this statement as the protagonists get to live the way they want; Cosimo an engaged and picaresque life, Sampath a life of peace and lethargy. The psychological picture of the two protagonists makes them similar irrespective of the difference in age. Cosimo appears to be more mature for his age, displaying typically adolescent rebellion while Sampath seems to be mentally underdeveloped, or at least on the level of an adolescent as well. The space Cosimo inhabits is represented as magical in terms of freedom it guarantees and the ancient beauty it displays, but at the same time as very realistic in terms of problems that need to be solved on everyday basis. The assumed discomfort keeps away other possible lodgers, aside from the banned Spanish aristocracy that settles on trees for a limited period of time until they are back in the king's grace.<sup>15</sup> Cosimo's life work is, therefore, based on solving practical problems and making his life easier, as well as clean, dignified, safe, warm etc.

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<sup>14</sup> We find only one concrete time-reference in the book and it is the date Sampath's sister plans to elope with her boyfriend, which is the date of the military action against the monkeys. It is April 30. The climbing starts a few months earlier, but the only time-reference at the beginning of his adventure may be found in the information that it is the wedding season, which could be any autumn-winter month from October on, and that it is the dry period, as the monsoon threat is often mentioned.

<sup>15</sup> The Spanish aristocracy inhabits the trees in the nearby town of Olivabassa after being exiled by King Carlos III. The political situation does not allow them to stay on Ligurian

There is a substantial difference between the life Cosimo lives in the trees and the life Sampath lives on the guava tree. As it has already been pointed out, they live exactly the life they wanted to, but Cosimo's is a continuation of his previous activities on the ground and in the parents' house.<sup>16</sup> He continues with schooling, playing with his younger brother, he takes part in his family meals and discussions sitting on a branch near the window. The tree-life does not isolate him: instead, it allows him to go beyond the unnoticeable boundaries of his previous life. Namely, as an eighteenth-century baron he would have not been able to develop relationships with lower classes, let alone to participate in agricultural, botanical or other forms of physical work. The fact that he is literally above the common people paradoxically makes him closer to their problems, needs and different realities. This is how Calvino develops his philosophical concept of freedom: one has to work, to earn trust, but one must also find a way to overcome one's social context in order to be taken seriously and to make a difference. Of course, it is all based on the historical changes that will lead to the French Revolution. Cosimo's privileged spatial position and the fact that, unlike Sampath, he moves all the time, gives us a God-like perspective, a wider picture of all that is happening underneath, although Calvino does not make him a God-like, immaculate personality.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, Sampath's newly discovered space of freedom is reduced to one orchard and one single tree. All the events preceding the climb forebode his escape: he seeks solitude, he is constantly reprimanded, he does not like to work, he does not know what he wants except for the immediate relief of pain caused by heat and sleep deprivation. Unlike Cosimo, he has no initiative whatsoever, no need to interact with people and no intention to hurt anyone on purpose: he does not want to cause distress to his father, does not look for trouble or quarrel. It needs to be said that Cosimo's adventures are derived from his willingness to act, explore, and interfere, whereas Sampath's newly acquired status derives from panic and no voluntary engagement. However, much like Cosimo, once definitely settled on the tree, he starts interacting with a range of characters he would never have met in his ground environment. The tree-life opens new social dimensions to him, gives him social powers and privileges, and eventually even

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soil, so they are permitted by the town officials to live on trees waiting for amnesty. Calvino ironically describes how the otherwise unimportant town of Olivabassa suddenly profits from these unexpected rich "tourists". (Calvino 1993: chapters XVII-XVIII).

<sup>16</sup> As Eliana Lourenço points out: „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 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.” (Lourenço de Lima Reis 2008: 164)

<sup>17</sup> If we return to the initial consideration of this novel being wrongfully categorized as children's literature, it must be pointed out that it contains a whole chapter (the 19<sup>th</sup>) dedicated to Cosimo's rather obscene love affairs, making the character anything but an immaculate fairy-tale hero.

transforms his contribution to the community from an economically unprofitable venture into a lucrative hermitage business.

In an essay on Calvino's characters Jacques Jouet states something that can very well be applied to Desai's Sampath as well:

These characters are revelatory, as they accept to be marginal and central at the same time. All the events at Ombrosa occur under the eyes of Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò who has chosen to isolate himself from the world. Paradoxically he misses nothing of what happens at Ombrosa, there is no place out of limits to him. He solves problems and his fame reaches Voltaire and Napoleon. [...] The character becomes a fixed and exposed point, a point of coincidence and intersection [...]. (Jouet 2000: 143-4)

Sampath, in his static and passive interaction, can also be regarded as the mathematical point of intersection, as, after placing him on the guava tree, Desai definitely builds up the plot entirely around other characters and episodes linked to his hermitage and friendship with the monkeys.

Having established the advantages of tree-life for the two protagonists, we now turn to the boundaries implicit in the new habitat. Are Cosimo and Sampath fully satisfied, accomplished and free? Apparently not. First of all, for Cosimo there is the obvious limitation derived from the extension of the forest-area, or the lack of trees sooner or later in his endeavors. Namely, even though the aforementioned setting means that his forest realm is quite large, it nevertheless ends at certain points leaving him unable to proceed.<sup>18</sup> This does not apply to Sampath as he does not wish to move out of the limited perimeter of the single guava tree until the very end of the story.

Secondly, and much more importantly, there are boundaries in human relations. Again, the two protagonists face problems on the opposite ends of the scale. Cosimo manages to interact with all sorts of people, including historical big names like Voltaire, Diderot and Napoleon, but does not succeed in maintaining a love-affair in fulfilling his need for affection and a lasting relationship. He builds up the libertine image of a great lover, seducer, entertainer of women (everything on trees), but cannot keep his one true childhood love, the ambiguous Viola.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The most important example of such a limitation is to be found in his following Viola who is horseback riding, and his being jealous of her "larger kingdom". (Calvino 1993: 198-9)

<sup>19</sup> "Viola, who possesses much of the same duplicity and freewheeling contradictoriness, is set outside and above and below the masculine world established by Cosimo and is therefore freer and more powerful than he is. Although she appears manipulative and threatening in her first encounter with Cosimo (when, from her position on her swing, she tries to get him to come down from the tree into her garden, and so gleefully tells him that he will lose all his powers if he does), what does Viola really do except make clear to Cosimo his own limitations? She accomplishes this in a less manipulative, but no less frightening, way in the course of their love relationship. By then, she has left her swing (an apt symbol of her free suspension between two worlds), but she continues to dramatize her passion for Cosimo and her freedom from him by racing about the countryside on her white horse and bounding up into the trees." (Migiel 1986: 65).



Sampath, who has only been searching for solitude, suddenly attracts a lot of people, so he is forced to interact, and he does it much more successfully than before. Before climbing the guava tree every human interaction (with his father, his colleagues or his boss) was unsuccessful and misunderstood. Once on the tree, the same interaction he wanted to avoid becomes a daily routine he must obey in order to maintain the baba-image (and get to stay on the tree). His excellent coexistence with the monkeys also becomes an indirect problem, as the animals terrorize everyone but him and pose a threat to the hermitage business. His limitations on the tree are based on the fact that he does not move, so he must be fed, washed and taken care of. He falls into another paradox: in order to be free and live the life he wants, he must rely on his family.

The last element of their personal limitations (and freedoms at the same time) lies within their intellectual possibilities and acquired knowledge. Cosimo continues to learn and read throughout his life and uses his knowledge to help others, to develop his status beyond the aristocratic origin. He becomes a thinker, he projects a utopian Arboreal Republic for the "just",<sup>20</sup> and he becomes famous not only for the peculiar fact that he lives on trees, but also for his wisdom and practical knowledge. His education and wide interests make him a source of practical advice for the public whereas his peculiar life-style makes it possible for all social classes to contact him. Ironically, Cosimo becomes a passionate book reader only after meeting a local bandit and a thief who hides in a cave and asks him to bring him books to read. The thief is eventually captured because the books have made him soft, uninterested in worldly things anymore. He only wants to finish Richardson's *Clarissa*. There is a fairy-tale ending to the thief's life, as he is being hanged much like the character of the book he is reading, that is Henry Fielding's *The Life and Death of Johnatan Wild, the Great*.<sup>21</sup>

Sampath is very clearly and unmistakably depicted as completely ignorant.<sup>22</sup> At work at the post office his colleagues' opinion of him is not flattering.<sup>23</sup> He

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<sup>20</sup> Calvino ironizes this planning of a perfect state, as the epilogue Cosimo imagines would have been this: "after having founded the Perfect state on trees and convinced all humanity to settle there and live happily, the author would have descended to live on the deserted earth." Again, Cosimo seeks what we can define as "engaged isolation", a life that will represent a contribution to society, but will be spent at a distance from society. (Calvino 1993: 172)

<sup>21</sup> The choice of books Cosimo provides for the thief Gian dei Brughi reflects the overall Italian 18<sup>th</sup>-century Anglophilia.

<sup>22</sup> Desai dedicates a very short humorous paragraph to Sampath's schooling: "One by one, all Sampath's classmates have found employment. Even the ones with report cards that were just like his. Report cards with so many red Fs the letter seemed to have multiplied with abandon, run wild by the absence of competition from the rest of the alphabet." (Desai 1999: 23).

<sup>23</sup> When the post-office starts preparing for the wedding of the boss's daughter, Sampath receives the following tasks: "Sampath has been allotted to the job of filling the glasses with sherbet, of washing the glasses once they were emptied by the guests, and then filling them up again; it had been decided by group consensus that even Sampath could be counted on to manage this simple task." (Desai 1999: 36)

spends his office hours reading other people's mail which soon proves to be the best thing he has unintentionally done for himself. From the letters he gains information that he starts using once on the guava tree. Aside from the initial consternation with him knowing very intimate data about people, which help promote him into a holy man, later on Sampath is mostly asked to reveal abstract truths which he manages to fulfil showing an elusive eloquence and intelligence far greater than the initial characterization implied. One example would be the following passage: „Baba, why are we so aggressive and greedy sometimes, when at other times we are just happy to sit beneath your tree?’ ‘On a hot day the bee buzzes louder, on a rainy day it sits quietly in his hive,’ answered Sampath.“ (Desai 1998: 104).

So the contribution of the tree-climbers to society is intellectually very different, and Cosimo's is based on encyclopedic knowledge (he reads the French Encyclopedia as it is being published), whereas Sampath's is based on information gathered accidentally. Nevertheless, they are both equally helpful.

## The Boundaries of Marriage

We have already mentioned marriage as a perspective Cosimo would have very much welcomed had he been able to marry Viola,<sup>24</sup> while Sampath would very much like to avoid altogether.<sup>25</sup> The issue of marriage is probably the most important secondary motif in Desai's novel. We find it at the beginning of the book when she describes Mr. Chawla's wedding to Sampath's strange mother, which is interpreted as the beginning of unusual behaviour in the family and the justification, or a possible explanation of Sampath's choices later on.

The next wedding described is that of the boss's daughter, presented as a thoroughly planned, expensive, traditional and quite theatrical feast, highly ritualized and extremely important for the parties involved. Therefore, Sampath's drunkenness and subsequent strip-tease at this wedding is regarded as the ultimate inexcusable offence, which gets him fired.

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<sup>24</sup> Viola is the love of Cosimo's life, a cheeky little girl from the neighboring estate (Calvino connects the family to the famous botanist Carl von Linne), who leaves town as Cosimo first climbs the trees. She reappears in the novel as a widow years later and engages in a secret relationship with him, but always hurting him, making him jealous and miserable. Before her reappearance he is said to have been a great lover, a Casanova of the region entertaining ladies in the trees. When she finally leaves for good, she ends up married to an Englishman and living in Calcutta (producing another if only geographical connection between the two novels). So, again, we find a characteristic of the epoch, the libertine lover, the no-strings-attached kind of relationship that projected to Calvino's times can easily be interpreted as an anticipation of the Flower-power sexual revolution age to come. There is a subtle *hommage* to the Italian renaissance writer Ludovico Ariosto in Cosimo's madness after Viola's departure (Calvino 1993: 214-5). Namely, much like Ariosto's Orlando, Cosimo too expresses his fury and desperation in destroying, trees. (Lourenço de Lima Reis 2008: 166)

<sup>25</sup> Psychologically, the fact that Sampath shows no sexual impulse or desire confirms the formerly stated claim on his immaturity, his being on the level of a preadolescent boy.

In case of Sampath's marriage, the issue is linked to a series of well-known and respected criteria which Desai describes admirably, with a twist of ironic rationality, including and exaggerating all possible discriminatory factors that can be at work when choosing a bride, such as the dowry in accordance with the skin complexion, or the level of schooling required, the necessary singing and dancing skills, absolutely no disabilities of any kind, and so on. Sampath is said to be "lucky to find anyone at all". So the third use of the marital motif (if we consider Sampath's parents' wedding as the first and the boss's daughter's wedding as the second one) occurs when the family is still trying to get Sampath down from the guava tree,<sup>26</sup> and, following the suggestion of a holy man, they bring him a bride into the orchard. The presentation of the bride is among the finest episodes in the novel as it takes as much of the traditional engagement rituals as possible, and adapts them to the new groom-in-the-tree context, creating a great example of tragicomedy. There is a beautiful counterpoint between Sampath's fantasy woman, the lady on the label of a coconut-shampoo bottle, and the actual "crow" (as his mother and grandmother point out) he encounters (Desai 1999: 59-61). The grotesque scene, with the girl falling from the tree and Sampath's terror when she touches his feet, is wittily summarized in a simple ironic sentence: "The signs for marriage were not auspicious" (Desai 1999: 61). Not only does he not descend at the prospect of marriage, but in this moment of extreme panic he starts also with what will be regarded as his "sermon", the display of his psychic powers, based on the intelligence gained by secretly reading other people's letters at the post office.

The marriage motif in the novel reappears in connection with Sampath's sister, Pinky. As in a kind of gradation, the novel contains the example of regular weddings, than a modification of a traditional engagement encounter, and in the end a completely anarchic disregard of all rules, traditions, parental wishes and advice for Pinky's insane infatuation and aggressive harassment of the ice-cream vendor.<sup>27</sup> The second part of the novel focuses on their love-story viewed in parallel with the town's military, police, government and other actions against the monkeys. This forbidden marriage prospect fails, too.

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<sup>26</sup> Before he gives up descending, the perceived insanity of Sampath's climb leads to a humorous display of different medical remedies the father uses in order to make him come down. He brings a common physician, a specialist in Tibetan medicine, Ayurvedic and homeopathic doctors, a naturopath and a renowned holy man. The (anti)climax of this scene occurs when the holy man suggests marriage as a safe way to get him down. (Desai 1999: 56-7)

<sup>27</sup> Much as Sampath's father, the ice-cream boy's family also tries to keep him away from the unacceptable match by introducing him to a future wife of their choice. The scene of their meeting is another of Desai's brilliant fragments in the novel, as the boy turns out to be attracted to the girl and having second thoughts on the elopement plan with Pinky. (Desai 1999:190-193)

## The Power of Food

As mentioned earlier, Battista's food terror is the cause of Cosimo's rebellion and transition from the ground to the trees. In the context of fairy tales she would represent the witch, as indicated by Marilyn Migiel:

Battista is an aggressive figure highly interested in exercising her powers; especially in the camp of food acquisition and preparation. Much of Battista's power is derived from her gruesome concoctions, many of which reveal a striking interest in bodily mutilation. [...] Yet the horror that surrounds Battista is not generated only by her macabre menus. The figure of Battista, dressed in black, conjures up many of those female figures who appear in black: nuns, witches, widows, old women beyond the age of childbearing. (Migiel 1986: 58-9)

It is relatively easy to define Battista's monster cooking as her own space of freedom, as a response to her quasi-nun-like secluded life in which she has nothing to hope for. However, Calvino writes a happy, optimistic, eighteenth-century rational fairy-tale, and in this context even a sinister character like Battista finds her happiness in an unexpected marriage.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand Battista's counterpart in Desai's novel is Sampath's mother Kulfi. Her longing for food begins during pregnancy with Sampath, but transcends the pregnancy stereotype, and becomes an obsession with strange food combinations. The great difference between the role of food in the novels is to be found in the fact that Sampath appreciates his mother's cooking, and once on the tree he only eats what she prepares. The family moving to the orchard allows her to wander around and gather herbs and plants, fruits and vegetables, and catch all sorts of animals. Her cooking is depicted as a gradation culminating in the last cauldron of gravy based on monkey meat. She is perceived as a witch by the spy engaged to expose Sampath for fraud. The spy is convinced that the boy is being drugged and tries unsuccessfully to get a sample of Kulfi's food to prove it. The book ends with him falling into the cauldron of monkey-gravy. The mother-figure is crucial for Sampath's well-being as she is the only one who understands her son's motivations, and the son is the only one who appreciates and gets to eat her very unusual cooking.<sup>29</sup>

## Freedom of Belief

Desai's novel relies much more than Calvino's on the issue of religion and spirituality. Indian society having been stereotypically considered to be highly

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<sup>28</sup> Battista is also the only character in the novel who tries to sabotage Cosimo's permanence on trees by covering a tree in a layer of adhesive substance which does not capture her brother but kills a lot of small forest animals. The cruelty of the scene is in accordance with her overall characterization in the novel. (Calvino 1993: 65)

<sup>29</sup> In Calvino too we find a rather peculiar mother called *la generalessa* (the lady general), raised in military surroundings, ironically depicting the stereotype of stern German education, but also very affectionate and doting on her children.

spiritual, gives room to Desai to comment on this aspect of her tradition as well. Aside from the omens around Sampath's birth and marriage, the true religious experiences start when in the eyes of his visitors he becomes the tree-baba, a holy man, a hermit. As if by magic, all of his previous flaws, such as being lazy, falling asleep, having an empty look, not listening to someone talking, suddenly become signs of rapture, meditation and communication with higher beings. His vague sentences (after having exhausted matter-of-fact mail-intelligence) easily classifiable as shallow existential or self-help rubbish, as has been exemplified before, become his believers' sermons, laws, enigmas to unveil. The only character immune to his aura is the father who tries to get the most out of the business. Desai magnificently depicts this epidemic of superficial spirituality very democratically sustaining from any potentially dangerous moralizing on the matter.

Calvino's own atheism is reflected also in his novel. Cosimo's family is engaged in a lawsuit against the Jesuits over a piece of land, so Cosimo's father is convinced that they are being monitored by the religious order. The only truly religious experience from the point of view of readers, and not of the protagonist, can be identified in the ending.<sup>30</sup> Cosimo climbs a high tree and grabs the rope hanging from an air-balloon disappearing in the sky. We may well say that he "goes to heaven" with all the connotations such a statement bears. His disappearance makes also a very imaginative fairy-tale ending and represents his final victory, as he does not end up buried in the ground. Sampath's final escape with the monkeys is much more ambiguous. If in fact he had ran away with the monkeys this would have made him a savage in the end. But, as it is never explicitly said that he escapes, we face another possibility of interpreting Sampath's end: when he disappears, in his place the family finds a gigantic guava fruit with a mark resembling his birthmark. A fairy-tale transformation just the other way round, from human to inhuman. Again, the monkeys take the fruit away with them.

## Conclusion

After having analyzed several aspects the two novels share, the crucial difference between the two choices to live in the trees lies in the protagonists' interpretations of the space they occupy. Thus Cosimo's lifestyle can be defined as dynamic whereas Sampath's is static. Cosimo starts moving within his arboreal boundaries the minute he decides to stay there for good, and one of the characteristics of his life-story is the fact that he always moves, that all the trees he can reach are part of his peculiar kingdom, that he has ways of getting to people and institutions such as the church, the library, his family mansion. He continues to live a so called normal life, to interact, to take part in activities and to help. He is not bothered by weather changes, by rain, by cold. Sampath's tree life is the very opposite. He climbs his guava tree during the drought period and his father becomes immediately aware that the time frame for their hermitage-

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<sup>30</sup> A thorough analysis of the religious aspects and metaphors in the novel can be found in the essay by J. M. Carlton.

business is limited to the coming of the monsoon period, and suggests building a temple and moving Sampath there. Sampath does not move, or explore, or travel like Cosimo, he is being fed, washed and provided for. He is essentially not interested in learning, discovering, making something. He is a lazy parasite mistaken for a hermit. But, regardless of this essential difference in their tree-life management, they both influence the society.

Consequently, while Calvino's *Baron in the Trees* makes it clear from the title that we are reading a novel constructed around the character of Cosimo,<sup>31</sup> an adventurous, allegoric, ironic but still a *Bildungsroman*, Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is an almost Amarcord-like (and there's another tree-climber in the famous Fellini movie) representation of a community, its problems, its every-day life shaken not by the new hermit (as this is financially a good thing both for the Chawla family and for the town), but by the monkey-terror.<sup>32</sup>

Sampath's religious aura and Cosimo's nobility guarantee them both an overall greater respect than they would have had on the ground. In the normal circumstances Cosimo would never interact with lower classes, peasants, workers, craftsmen as he does from the trees. Before becoming a "tree baba" Sampath is at the very end of the social ladder, so it is possible to conclude that their choices have improved their status. One of the many paradoxes in these novels lies in the fact that they both run from publicity, search for solitude and peace, but become very famous and appreciated. Cosimo becomes appreciated for his knowledge and practical help provided to those in need, but essentially more for his overstepping the boundaries of social classes than for his living on trees. Sampath, on the other hand, acquires appreciation and fame because of his climbing the guava tree and knowing what was not meant to be publicly known. He becomes a valuable economic asset for his community and a tourist-attraction that everyone can profit from.

While Calvino allegorically and ironically comments on his own times and struggles through this temporal distance of the Enlightenment period, Kiran Desai incorporates in her novel all the stereotypes about Indian society from a viewpoint acquired from a comfortable spatial distance, by the optics of the so called Indian diaspora.<sup>33</sup> She chooses a humorous approach, a benevolent yet

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<sup>31</sup> The narrator of the novel being his brother Biagio. For further insight into the complexity and the differences between the narrative structures of the novels see: Lourenço de Lima Reis 2008: 165-166.

<sup>32</sup> The problem of the drunken monkeys and the activities of the troops deployed to get rid of them occupy a rather large part of the novel in which the role of Sampath becomes secondary. In the last chapters Desai focuses much more on the organizational aspects, the poor cooperation between government bodies such as the military and the police, the war-like atmosphere of anxiety and fear, and Sampath's sister eloping plans. In this context Sampath's inability to control the monkeys and his wish to safeguard them make him lose his peace of mind and eventually his interest in staying in the guava tree and communicating.

<sup>33</sup> As Eliana Lourenço points out: "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

ironic representation that unveils some of the Indian myths for what they really are, but also underlines the universalities behind the folklore.

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## CALVINO – DESAI, O SLOBODI I OTUĐENJU. PRAVILA I GRANICE ŽIVOTA NA STABLU.

Calvinov roman *Il barone rampante* (1957) nastao je čak četrdeset godina prije romana *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) Kiran Desai, no, unatoč posve različitom kontekstu i vremenu nastanka, s potonjim dijeli motiv koji za oba romana predstavlja okosnicu radnje: povlačenje protagonista na stablo i uspostavu nove životne sredine iznad zemlje.

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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." (Lourenço de Lima Reis 2008: 170)

Pritom Calvino opisuje gotovo cjeloživotni boravak junaka na stablu, dok Desai predstavlja znatno kraće vremensko razdoblje. Na temelju uočenih sličnosti i razlika u obradi istih motiva, primjerice vjere ili braka, a posebice novoga životnog prostora, članak analizira poimanje slobode koju likovi promiču, te neizbježna pravila i granice koji postoje ili se paradoksalno stvaraju unatoč utopijskome životu.

*Key words:* Italo Calvino, Kiran Desai, freedom, boundaries, fairy tale, life on trees

*Ključne riječi:* Italo Calvino, Kiran Desai, sloboda, granice, život na stablu