

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard
Passage Based Question (Chapter 1)

Read an excerpt from ‘Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard’ below and answer the questions that follow.

- 1 That summer the heat had enveloped the whole of Shahkot in a murky yellow haze. The clutter of rooftops and washing lines that usually stretched all the way to the foothills at the horizon grew blurred and merged with the dust-filled sky.
- 2 Shahkot boasted some of the highest temperatures in the country and here there were dozens of monsoon inducing proposals. Mr Chawla himself submitted a proposal to the forestry department for the cutting and growing of vegetation in elaborate patterns; the army proposed the scattering and driving of clouds by jet planes flying in a special geometric or mation; the police a frog wedding to be performed by temple priests. Vermaji of the university invented a giant fan which he hoped would attract the southern monsoon clouds by creating a wind tunnel moving north towards the Himalayas, and he petitioned the Electricity Supply Board for enough power to test it. Amateur scientists from Mr Barnala of Tailor Gully to Miss Raina from the Sainik Farms area attended trade fairs where they displayed instruments that emitted magnetic rays and loud buzzing sounds. Everyone in town was worried. The mercury in the police station thermometer had police station thermometer has exceeded the gradations Kapoor & Sons Happy Weather Company had seen fit to establish, leaping beyond memory and imagination, and outdoing the predictions of even Mr Chawla’s mother, Ammaji, who liked to think she knew exactly what the future would bring.

- 3 It was a summer that sent the dizzy pulse of fever into the sky, in which even rules and laws that usually stood straight and purposeful grew limp, like plants exposed to the afternoon sun, and weak. The heat softened and spread the roads into sticky pools of pitch and melted the grease in the Brigadier's moustache so that it drooped and uncurled, casting shadows on his fine, crisp presence. It burned the Malhotras' daughter far too dark for a decent marriage and caused the water, if it came at all, to spurt, scalding, from the taps. The bees flew drunk on nectar that had turned alcoholic; the policemen slept all day in the banana grove; the local judge bribed an immigration official and left to join his brother in Copenhagen. Foreigners in their tour buses turned and went home, while Shahkotians argued for spots directly below their ceiling fans, leaving only for minutes if absolutely necessary and then hurrying back. In the marketplace, they raided the shops for palm leaf fans and bought grey blocks of ice that smoked like small fires. They rested their heads against the coolness of melons before cutting into them, held glasses against cheeks and foreheads between sips, fanned themselves at the stove with bunches of spinach before letting go reluctantly, for the sake of the evening meal. 25 30 35
- 4 The weeks passed, but the monsoon did not arrive. And by the time it was September, they had given up hope. 40
- 5 It was this year that Sampath Chawla was born to his mother, Kulfi. She was twenty-one years old, newly married to Mr Chawla, and pregnant. By late September the heat and lack of rain had combined to produce terrible conditions of drought. She grew bigger as it got worse. It got to be so bad that famine-relief camps were set up by the Red Cross to the west of Shahkot. The supply planes flew right over the bazaar and Shahkotians, watching with their 45

heads tilted back, wondered why they didn't stop for them as well, for surely they were suffering quite enough to warrant the same attention and care being so assiduously delivered elsewhere. The ration shop was distributing rice and lentils in smaller and smaller portions all the time. There was no fruit to be found anywhere and hardly any vegetables. Prices had risen so high, nobody would buy the scraggy chickens sitting in cages outside the meat shop. Finally the poor butcher had to eat them himself, and after the last one, he was forced to turn vegetarian like the rest of the town.

6 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, shrivelled and yellow. People stopped short in amazement as she walked down the street. How big she was! They forgot their dealings in the almost empty marketplace. They teetered on their bicycles as they looked around for just another sight of that stomach extending improbably before her like a huge growth upon a slender tree. Her eyes were so dark, so sooty and vehement, though, these people who turned their heads to stare turned quickly away again, ill at ease for some reason and unsettled. Not noticing them, she passed by as if they weren't there at all. On her face, about her mouth and in the set of her chin was an expression intent and determined but yet far away and distant, as if all her thoughts were concentrated upon a point invisible to everybody but herself. She walked through Shahkot like this, as distracted as this as strange as this.

7 'What do you expect?' asked Ammaji, her mother-in-law, making excuses when curious neighbours asked about Kulfi's state of mind. 'What do you expect from a woman with a baby in her belly like a little fish?'

8 But Kulfi was not thinking of the baby in her belly like a little fish. She was

thinking of fish themselves. Of fish in many forms. Of fish big enough and good enough to feed the hunger that had overtaken her in the past months like a wave. She thought of fish curries and fish kebabs. Of pomfret, bekti, ruhi. Of shoals of whiskered shrimp. Of chewy mussels. She thought of food abundant 75 in all its many incarnations. Of fenugreek and camel milk, yam and corn. Mangoes and coconuts and custard apples. Mushrooms sprouting like umbrellas in the monsoon season. Nuts, wrinkled in their shells, brown-skinned, milky-fleshed.

- 9 The house was small for her big desire. She walked from the tiny blue 80 bedroom to the kitchen thick with the smell of kerosene, around the table and chairs, up and down the balcony, down the stairs past the rooms of neighbours who shook their heads over her, then around the jamun tree in the middle of the courtyard.

Refer to the passage given and answer the questions which follow.

- (a) With close reference to the text, explain what is striking about the way the heat is described.
- (b) What are your impressions of Kulfi? Explain with reference to the text provided.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS

(A)

- The extremity of the heat
- The worry and prevailing tension in the village due to the heat
- The desperation of the villagers in dealing with the heat

(B)

- She is physically intimidating/imposing
- She is incredibly hungry
- She is oblivious to the world around her