



ISSN 0976 8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

OCTOBER 2019
VOL. 10 | ISSUE - 5

10TH YEAR OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Magical Realism in Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof*

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Article History: Submitted-28/09/2019, Revised-05/11/2019, Accepted-07/11/2019, Published-20/11/2019.

Abstract:

The aim of this research paper is to critically examine and analyze Raj Kamal Jha's third novel *Fireproof* in order to bring out the aspects of magical realism in the text. The novel *Fireproof* can be labelled under the genre of consolation as it gives voice to the innumerable, nameless victims, both living and dead, of religious violence and as it opens our eyes to events and atrocities that we would rather avoid to see. Magical Realism abounds in this novel as the tragic characters arouse discomfiture as they keep on appearing as dead people or spirits of the dead. This novel is also a personal tragedy of a guilty conscience, anguish, grief and redemption, as presented through the subjective perspective of the protagonist who is also the *narrator of the story*. The paper shall also expostulate that how by using the magical realism technique, Jha has successfully reached the dark recesses of a murderer's subconscious mind and dug out the secrets that lay buried deep and has woven a beautiful tale of sin and redemption.

Keywords: Magical Realism, religious violence, dead spirits, guilt, redemption.

Introduction

Fireproof is the third novel published in 2006 by a contemporary and consummate artist and novelist Raj Kamal Jha, about whom the *Independent* writes, "Think Paul Auster, crossed with Salman Rushdie." Jha who is presently working as the Editor of *The Indian Express*, shot into literary fame with the publication of his first debut novel *The Blue Bedspread* (1999), which received the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Book (Eurasia) in the year 2000. It was also declared the New York Times Notable Book of the Year. His second novel in the series was *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003), which was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award of the year. After attaining much critical acclaim and appreciation for his third book *Fireproof*,

Jha has recently added two more novels to his list; *She will build Him a City* (2015) and *The City and the Sea* (2019).

As a master story-teller Jha deals with many contemporary Indian issues which are mainly considered as taboo themes: he lifts the curtain off a wide-ranging disturbing and burning topics such as; domestic violence, child abuse, incest, lesbianism, rape, murders, communal violence and so on. Jha has employed the magical realism approach in most of his works as it helps in recounting the unspeakable trauma experiences which cannot be stated otherwise as realism sometimes falls short of it. His purpose is to bring to the fore the wrongdoings and offer consolation as he himself asserts that a story can act as a bandage to dress our wound.

The term Magic Realism was coined by German art critic Franz Roch in 1925 to describe the New Objectivity style of painting. Later, this concept was adopted and popularized by the Latin American authors throughout the twentieth century as *lo real maravilloso*, the marvelous real. Magic Realism is an oft-confused genre due to its ambiguity. As Mexican literary critic Luis Leal said, "If you can explain it, then it's not magical realism" (Luis Leal, 120). Simply stated, Magical Realism is a literary or artistic genre in which realistic narrative and naturalistic technique are combined with surreal elements of dream or fantasy. It is real world setting combined with fantastical elements. Notable writers of Magical Realism include Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende and Salman Rushdie and many others. According to Chris Baldick, "levitation, flight, telepathy, telekinesis are among the means that magic realism adopts in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the twentieth century" (Chris Baldick, 128). Thus, Magical Realism is not completely realistic, it has the feel of magic on the edges- that anything is possible. J. A. Cuddon has defined magical realism as "the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and fantastic or bizzare, skillful time shifts, convolute and even labyrinthine narrative and plots." There is "miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable" (J.A. Cuddon, 417). Magic Realism has a dream like quality. It centers on the fantastic objects in a real, normal and mundane world. As stated by Brenda Cooper, "Magical realism attempts to capture reality by way of a depiction of life's many dimensions, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, rational and mysterious" (Cooper 32).

In the novel *Fireproof*, the atmosphere is nightmarish, brooding and calamitous rather than dream-like. The sense of fear, suspense and uncertainty is the central motif which runs through all the parts of the novel. The novel reconstructs the Gujarat (Godhra) communal riots of 2002. The text is a perfectly constructed discourse on the lives of the dead and the living, who were affected by the mass scale killings, lynchings and other horrendous acts of violence. The Observer aptly remarks that '*Fireproof* ventures where reportage cannot go, granting even those who have perished a voice.' The novel is also a study of the psychological trauma, internal guilt and shame (though repressed) of the perpetrator of that crime, the anti-hero, the central figure of the novel, Mr. Jay.

The novel opens as recounting a dream; a day and night in the life of Mr. Jay who is an ordinary, average, undistinguished common man, in February 2002, when the city of Gujarat was on fire. Mr. Jay is waiting outside the Maternity Ward of the Holy Angel Nursing and Graduate Hospital at 1607 Mahatma Gandhi Road, where his wife is admitted. That day something unexpected and shocking happens as Mr. Jay is handed a severely and hideously deformed child- it is a baby with no limbs- or features, save a pair of beautiful eyes. Jay, as the narrator describes him thus:

"Each eye of the baby was perfectly shaped, fully functional. His eyebrows were perfect, too. As if drawn by an artist, talented and tender, who had all the time in the world and only two things to pour his life's purpose into: these two lines. The rest of the baby was a mess" (Jha, *Fireproof* 13).

The novel follows the magical realistic pattern of characterization as it focuses on depicting ordinary people going about the humdrum activities of their day-to-day living. Everything is normal except for a few elements that go beyond the realm of mundane reality as here is the case of that grotesquely formed baby whom Jay names 'Ithim'-(It+Him), and whom people may identify as 'It' (a monster) or 'Him' (a boy).

As per the magical realistic tradition of the subtle use of supernatural elements, we find ghosts or the dead spirits abounding in *Fireproof*. They are everywhere in this surreal account, appearing and disappearing, in the Prologue, footnotes and the Epilogue; telling the stories of their murders in small type alongside the narrator's story, countering it and refusing to die down

or to be held back as they have become 'fireproof' now. They act as the agents of punishment and justice as they continue to shake and awaken the dead consciousness of the guilty protagonist and finally bring upon his atonement and redemption. The chief dead characters are Miss Glass, Head Nurse, Doctor 1, Doctor 2 and the dwarf Bright Shirt. Besides, there is personification of three objects, namely The Book, The Watch and The Towel, who act as characters and recount their tales of horror. These animated objects perform the magical realistic function of bringing 'Absence' into 'Presence' and filling in the gaps and silences in the main narrative through their re-narration and ultimate disclosure of Jay's role in the massacres. Miss Glass aptly points out to the importance of their role during a mock enactment of the absurd play in the fantasy circus of the Dead:

"They are here because they are eye-witnesses and they are ear-witnesses. And unlike us, people who were killed, these three are objects. That's why their story will be more objective. And their words will, therefore, carry more weight" (Jha, *Fireproof* 333).

The ghost figure of Ithim as a recurrent image throughout the text also serves as a symbol of inexpressible brutality of Jay's crime. As elaborated by Maya Jaggi:

"The child, a limbless creature of charred and wrinkled flesh, whose only recognizable features are his all-seeing eyes, at first appears a grotesque embodiment of the chaos, or an innocent co-relative of the victims. But as the father grows loving and protective of the son he names Ithim (It-Him), the infant emerges as having a more direct link to Jay's deeds- those he may have suppressed from his narrative-as a personification of guilt and the path to atonement,"

Chris Baldick explained the Magical Realistic fiction as comprising of "fabulous and fantastic events which maintain the reliable tone of objective realistic report" (Chris Baldick, 128). Such fantasy events are narrated by Jay such as when he witnesses the dead bodies falling to the ground from nowhere as if they have rained from the sky and later the mock enactment of the play by the dead in a fantasy in water, 'The Hideout'. This place builds a sense of transcendence and the reality of the physical world gets dissolved. The landscape shifts from the Indian context and becomes universal. Here everything is serene, soothing, calm, clean and beautiful:

“So placid was the water and along with it the reflection of the train that it seemed I was looking at a painting, perhaps Still Life, Train at Night, the black canvas stretched tight, taut from one end of the sky to the other. Adding to this effect was the silence and the odd colour of the sky, not black as in the sky, but more a deep shade of purple like an over-ripe plum, the stars sprayed like flecks of powdered sugar. Even the low hanging moon sparkled, as if someone had climbed up and scrubbed it clean; it had not one dark smudge” (Jha, *Fireproof* 312-312).

Time is more fluid in *Fireproof*, it just stops and then starts up again. It is not linear and doesn't flow in one direction as Jha permits his narrator to move back and forth in time without explanation. However, whenever the author seems about to lose control of the narrative, he pulls back Jay to his child, Ithim. There is a digression in Jay's narrative where he recounts an experience of his past, when his mother was stung by a scorpion when he was a child. In Magical Realism also time doesn't behave itself:

“Time does not always march forward in the magical realist world view. The distant past is present in every moment, and the future has already happened. Great shifts in the narrative's time sequence reflect a reality that is almost outside of time. This accounts for ghosts, for premonitions, and the feeling that time is a great repetition rather than a progression.”

-Bruce Holland Rogers

Jha has constantly used authorial reticence which is another device of Magical Realism. With his oneiric narration, he withholds information from the readers to make the circumstances vague and mysterious. Even the narrator, Jay, is kept in the dark and he is wallowing in ambiguous situations till the end when he finally discovers the truth about himself and the baby, Ithim. Jha achieves his end through his non-linear narrative technique which deftly blurs the distinction between the fact and fiction, memory and imagination. His self-conscious narrator indulges in monologues most of the time and sometimes he surrenders the narrative to another character and sometimes shifts to third person narration, thereby forming several narrative frameworks so the readers know only as much as the narrator knows.

Jha's tone and writing style is literary, his language is highly metaphorical and so lyrical that it crafts its own magic in the story. He alternately uses understatements and overstatements to create the hallucinatory encounters with the dead. He beautifully showcases the burning and

collapsing of each dream of the once living by focusing and depicting each detail with precision; the falling bodies, the charred shops, the burnt houses, the newly born, the dead, the wounded. He has woven a gripping tale after intermingling dream and nightmarish reality so tightly by his matter-of-fact delivery of both the fantastic and the disturbingly real.

“Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles in closed or open structures. In Magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts. The principal thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances. In Magical realism key events have no logical or psychological explanation. The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things.”

-Luis Leal

Jha is a master of subtlety. His fantastic also starts seeming plausible at some points. He doesn't give explanations for the inexplicable and the reader has to go on with the doubt that whether the fantastic elements are real or not. All the small, insignificant things are interconnected and form meaning in the greater whole. The author goes on dropping hints throughout the story and the resolution comes ultimately when all the bits fall in place and the readers realize where the story had been going all along even though they didn't recognize it before. It all makes sense in the end when the ghosts reveal who Ithim really is; he is a changeling, an unborn foetus of Abba's daughter-in-law, who was taken out before time from the mother's womb and mutilated and murdered alongwith the mother who was also heinously assaulted, gagged, raped and killed. The baby was a haunting punishment to Jay, it was his penance baby. As Miss Glass puts it:

“The baby is one thing he cannot deny, he cannot forget. For one day and one night in this city on fire, he loved this baby because he thought it was his own, that he was the father. So he held it close, he took care of it, he travelled with it across the city. And now he knows who the baby is, how it was forced into the world of the living, how its mother was killed, how he had a

hand in this, whenever he thinks about the baby, he will have to think about the fire, about the killing.” (Jha, *Fireproof* 358)

(“[...] And yet he cannot talk about this to anyone; he has to carry the burden of a story he can never tell. A story of his love that carries, within it, the story of his hate. That, I guess, is justice. Not the best, not the cleanest, if you ask me, but I think it’s as good as we, the dead, can get.” (Jha, *Fireproof* 358)

Thus, the theme of *Fireproof* is similar to most of the novels belonging to magical realism genre, i.e. ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’. It is a searing and insightful tale of crime and punishment. Like a Greek tragedy, the ghosts form a Chorus and Jay is the protagonist whose hamartia is that he thinks he can escape his punishment if he keeps his memory repressed and does not acknowledge his sin:

“There is no burden I carry, whatever the dead may say. Because I am alive, I can choose what to remember, I can choose what to forget. (Jha, *Fireproof* 372)

But he undergoes lot of mental turmoil and schizophrenic disintegration, loss and pain as is evident from his subconscious thought process and violent dreams. His guilt finally strikes him full force and he has to admit that he is not innocent, that he has taken part in the riots and now has to bear the consequences for the rest of his life. His repentant soul finally cries out, ‘I am guilty’ and he knows that the dead have heard his confession. It is only after he sheds his indifference, callousness and shamelessness and atones deeply, that he is let free of his hallucinations and ravings by the ghosts and allowed to join the normal course of life where his wife and newly-born daughter await him in the same hospital from where the story took off.

Jha keeps the story open-ended so as to reiterate the vital questions- ‘Is guilt enough for forgiveness?’ and ‘Can the enormity of the crimes be reduced and made bearable with the passing time?’ This fascinating tale of mayhem that tracks the education and evolution of the ‘crime-infested soul of Jay, also jolts, enlightens and haunts the reader’s conscience after each reading.

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