

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

August 2013 Vol. 4 Issue IV

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Magical Realism in the Fictional Works of Manoj Das

Dr. Pragyan Prabartika Dash

Lecturer in English
Vyasnanagar Autonomous College
Jajpurroad, Odisha, India

Magical Realism has gained currency as an artistic genre in the Post Colonial and Post Modern era. The chief practitioners of this genre are Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Ben Okri, Alejo Carpentier, Tony Morrison and Salman Rushdie who created milestones in world literature by the application of the devices of magical realism in their fictional works. Magical realism, though a product of western literature, is understood as a universal theory which interprets truth with a new vision. The adaptability of western theories is likely to generate protest and spiritual challenge since it involves the presentation of the regional subjects in a contemporary setting. In the Indian context, magical realism is manifest in the basic technique of storytelling, characterization, presentation of the supernatural as the natural through setting and atmosphere with a third world consciousness. It introduces elements of the mythological and the fantastical into the contemporary settings. The works of Manoj Das bear a sharp resemblance with the western magical realist writings while they are discussed in terms of theory, practice and aspects of magical realism. In this context, Mohanty opines:

Historical legacy of colonial experience and the subsequent efforts at decolonization are the commonalities generally identified between India and the Latin American nations. But it is interesting that there exist common contextual and ideological markers in the reading of the literatures of these nations. Narrative technique and storytelling, which, as Gabriel Garcia Marquez says, is the way my grandmother used to tell the story lend 'magic realism' to the tale, as in the works of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, besides Marquez in Columbia.

... comparable storytelling modes and 'magic realism' in the works of Oriya writers like Gopinath Mohanty, Manoj Das. . . the common techniques and modes in the literature of Orissa, a culturally rich state in India, and Latin American nations reveal the awareness of the real and the surreal and help forge common imaginaries across cultures. (SSRN. Jan 23, 2008.web)

Among the fictional works of Das, *Selected Fiction*, a volume of twenty eight short stories, and a novella titled *The Tiger at Twilight*; the two volumes of short stories - *Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories*, and *The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies*; the three novels - *Cyclones*, *Chasing the Rainbow*, and *The Escapist*; and the two novellas - *The Fourth Friend* and *The Legend of the Golden Valley* can be treated as magical realist texts.

There are many magical realist devices like dream, folklore, fairytale, fable, superstition and supernaturalism used by Mr. Das in the fictional components like character, setting, atmosphere and narrative technique to transform the common and the everyday reality into the awesome and the unreal with a view to reaching beyond the confines of realism while

maintaining a strong social relevance. His strong faith in the miraculous and the supernatural prompts him to convey to his readers through strange characters and situations, the fantastic features of reality. The fictional works of Manoj Das embody a perception of reality which includes both the quotidian, objective reality and the reality beyond the knowable.

Mr. Das' fictional works embody a vision of complex reality which shows faithfulness to our everyday, physical reality as well as to the unfamiliar dimensions of a hyper reality existing beyond the physical reality. He projects this complex reality by mingling the mundane with the fantastic, both in terms of themes and techniques. In most of his fictional works he deals with unfamiliar themes by the use of various magical realist devices like coincidences, serendipity, consequentialism, poetic justice and divine justice, supernatural powers, abilities, beings and events, prophesies, omens, premonitions and superstitions. Like a true magical realist he uses elements from parables, fairytales, dreams, and mythologies for a perfect blending of fantasy and realism to convey the fantastical features of reality. He portrays true to life characters, sometimes endowed with 'magical' qualities, as well as characters having magical qualities about them and totally magical characters like ghosts, fairies, demons and spirits.

In his *Selected Fiction* the living and the non-living characters are portrayed with equal care along with their quest for finding the eternal truth in everyday circumstances. The fictions in the said volume show analytically the issues related to dreams, illusions, hallucinations, and other psychological aspects. *Selected Fiction*, Says Ahluwalia, "moves us from the physical to the metaphysical with sinuous ease" (*The Indian Express*, June 3, 2001.web)¹. There are adventures and explorations along with an adolescent innocence contrasted by devastations and decay of life, as in the story "The Dusky Horizon". The theme of *The Tiger at Twilight* seems to be gothic because of the terror rooted in the subconscious of the characters, but the mingling of the supernatural with the natural and the metamorphosis which blurs the distinction between appearance and reality characterize the novella to be a magical realist text. Bizarre things happen throughout the story, creating an atmosphere of awe and wonder.

Innovative, imaginative and constructive ideas are presented in *Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories*. The author goes beyond the visible truths through his treatment of the themes like mysticism, occultism, spiritualism and supernaturalism. Characters encounter the invisible truth through irony and paradox, sometimes coping with it and at other times failing to do so.

The remarkable impact of mystery that encompasses the entire childhood of the author, as emphasized by the author himself and by many critics, is omnipresent in his writings. The collected memories of his childhood are often magical, yet vital. The author has graphically presented them in his novel *Chasing the Rainbow*. It reflects his own village Sankhari, the sea near his village, and the magical setting of Sundervan which is the inhabitance of the ferocious Royal Bengal tigers. Ghosts, spirits and fairies also visit that place as commonly as any human being visits it. The Indian village life, its superstitions and blind beliefs and its ever-changing scenario add more mystery to this novel as well as to his other works. Through his realistic presentation of the past, he often makes the reader nostalgic for a bygone world of the Indian village life in the early part of twentieth-century.

Most parts of human life are exhausted in its survival. Yet, the remaining part goes beyond the limit of survival or existence. In the novel *The Escapist* Das has developed a

conscious study of the subconscious, evolving new meanings for the traditional truths. Disconnected from the known world and the known realities, a spiritual metamorphosis is achieved by the protagonist. The search for self begins with that and finally the self meets the liberation of soul.

In *Cyclones* the setting of Kusumpur, the coastal village resembles any village of the colonized India that goes through the turmoil of transition and the aspirations of future. Decay and creativity occur simultaneously in the flux of change and changelessness. Multiple realities come before the protagonist while he is entangled in the search for national and self identity. Nature comes in humanized form and mysticism overcomes rationalism in unfolding the ultimate truth.

In *Legend of the Golden Valley* and *The Lady Who Died one and a Half Times and Other Fantasies*, the modern predicament is presented through mythology and the existential thought is contrasted by re-telling the legendary tales and folk tales about birds and animals. There is the extensive use of myths and fables where animals, birds, and non-living and supernatural agents are portrayed as characters of the real world in the atmosphere of realistic backgrounds. These attempts serve as communicative media to cover up the gap between change and continuity, transition and stability and decay and creativity. The stories in the volume *The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* have their beginnings in either the *Jatakas* or the *Panchatantra*, but they continue taking the reader beyond the point where those stories end. Comprising eleven stories and one novelette, they are examples of great craftsmanship and it is interesting to know what happens after the original stories of the *Jatakas* or the *Panchatantra* ended. The central characters and narrators of the first five stories are two travellers - Samanta and Abolkara - who, in the tradition of some gypsies, visit uncanny places in search of knowledge. Samanta, the wise master, tries to unfold the mysteries behind the questions of Abolkara, the moody servant. Samanta, through the process of answering and solving the mysteries in the stories - "The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times", "The Last Demoness", "The Lion who Sprang to Life After a Century", "Jewels from the Sky" and "The Last Night" - makes the reader move between the real and the marvellous worlds. These stories are based on the original version of Pundit Vishnu Sharma and are retold by Das with new twists which identify him as a magical realist writer. Where Salman Rushdie merges political satire and caricature with fairy-tale imageries and imaginations, Das emphasizes more in myths, fairy-tales and folk-tales. The volume *The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* is full of fantastical elements, but the element of satire is quite noticeable. Humour and satire are Das' favourite techniques where there is a special purpose, yet magic comes to him naturally.

Das himself believes in the supernatural. In an interview with Raja, he confirms it.

Raja: Do you believe in the Supernatural?

Das: I do. You see, supernatural is a relative experience. There are several planes of reality. (*World of Manoj Das*.web)

People very often perceive things and events as real and actual through the aid of their mind, ignoring that the soul's anxiety and the heart's claim also form significant parts of their being. A creative art is a message of possibility above all materialistic existence which is

received from the meeting of the real and the surreal in a magical realist work. In the opinion of Das, every genuine creative art is extra-ordinary. The experience of some unseen power comes through greater and bigger channels. In the ordinary psychological level we come across only the half-truth or part-truth, judged by the mind only. But the ultimate knowledge comes from greater spiritual realization. Like a true magical realist, he blends the fantastic with the real, or mixes the bizarre with the logical and the plausible.

The images Das uses are real, visible and powerful, but most often the concept of reality he presents is fantastic and exaggerated. The reader of an otherwise realistic text is instantly disoriented when something otherworldly happens. But in a magical realist text this otherworldliness does not confound the reader. These texts provoke the readers into reevaluating their own individual perceptions of the world. They require a dual perspective where equal credibility must be given to the plausible, and at the same time, to the uncanny.

Like other magical realist writers, Das uses a varied range of themes forming a close resemblance between the usual and the unusual. Dream analysis and psychological studies are often used for thematic purpose by him. Das treats dream as an important theme in many of his fictional works. It fulfils his purpose of mingling reality with imagination. Dreams are known to be composed of various elements like reminiscences, remembrance and sensory stimuli. Dreams come to us within some seconds, but our subconscious presents them to us in a dramatized form. However absurd the dramatization may be, the dreamer in a magical realist text has no doubts about their authenticity. The same is true for a hypnotized person. He may respond to the most unbelievable suggestions. He may fall into some trance, become struck with the natural and the supernatural, and hallucinate things and events. This is glaringly noticeable in many of Das' works.

What is clear from the theme of death dealt with by Das in his fictions is that there is a fair possibility of transmigration of an individual spirit into some other world if he does not find the environment conducive for his bodily existence to live a meaningful life. Raja writes, "Manoj Das is a believer in the mystic purpose of death. If the individual does not find the environment around its bodily existence quite conducive to its fruitful living or experience, it will leave the body under some pretext" (*Many Worlds of Manoj Das* 43). This theme is significantly treated in the story "Sita's Marriage". Further, those who have some unfulfilled desires and aspirations that are very much adorable and wanted by them suffer even after their earthly departure. Their souls move around their favorite places and people, not knowing that the attachment is really worthless, which is clearly illustrated in the story "The Bridge in the Moonlit Night". However, a similar paradoxical effect of life and death can be seen in "The Assault", and "The Kite" etc.

For Manoj Das the soul permits physical death when it comes naturally. But when one unwillingly accepts death, having no other substitute left before him, there the soul does not permit it. Where he thinks it to be the only way to get rid of pain, there he misunderstands because he takes this pain along with him to the other world to suffer and regret. And before it occurs, the soul passes through many more planes of reality. This theme is well treated in stories like "A Night in the Haunted House", "Friends and Strangers" and "The Dusky Horizon".

Nature and its objects often affect the mind of the characters in the works of Das and dramatic atmosphere is created there automatically. For example, moonlit night often plays a

vital role in his fictions. It creates an environment of mysterious shadow. It gives hallucinatory experiences in normal states of mind. Hallucinatory experiences are not merely the prerogative of the insane or the normal people in abnormal states, but they occur spontaneously in a significant proportion among the normal people, when in good health and not undergoing particular stress or other abnormal circumstance.

Wonder and mystery surround the background of the fictions of Das. But they are realistic from the point of view of the living, struggling characters; the numerous important, unimportant experiences; the psychological complexities; and the social, family-related preventions and bondages in front of us. Our aspirations and disappointments which envelop our very existence are only conveyed through unreal or fantastical elements. Das resolves that the invisible and the super-sensible presences are hidden behind the visible reality. He mingles them with man's universal destiny. The fictional world of Das reflects the ridiculous and the pitiable experiences felt by our consciousness, but, in spite of all the helplessness, man alone proves his existence powerfully: he wins even if he meets defeat. Das' works deal with such paradox as we come across in magical realist texts.

For Das, the life that is known to us is not wholesome. But, an ever-increasing developing spirit always guides it. A writer does not only get inspiration from the surrounding situations, but also gets it from the unidentified split of power which is hidden inside life. Most part of that life cannot be discovered through the visible reality and its secrets lie hidden behind the undiscovered truth. Das, in a magical realistic manner, successfully covers the distance between those secrets and that truth.

Das always portrays realistic characters, whether they are human or non-human, living or non-living. While he creates characters of blood and flesh, true to life characters from real, everyday life, he also very often projects birds and beasts, as well as ghosts and other supernatural beings as characters in the true tradition of folklores, fairytales and myths to convey to his readers a vision of the fantastic features of reality. Like a matured magic realist he invests the real characters with abnormal, magical qualities or creates totally magical characters having superhuman qualities. He mingles and juxtaposes one category of these characters with the others in order to realize his magical realist themes. So we meet tigers, monkeys, crocodiles, owls, etc possessing human ego, greed, stupidity, passion and intelligence in the fictional works of Mr. Das. There are unlimited channels through which the non-living characters are connected with the living ones, leaving little difference between the two. Both are accepted by the reader because they are perceived as real and actual. For instance, there is character like the living headmistress of "Evenings at Nijanpur" who is supposed to be in love with the spirit of a young man, and the non-living apparition of that young man who responds to her love by possessing the living body of another young man.

Das has mastered the art of creating atmosphere. His non-living characters, for instance, feel at home in the eerie ambience made up of deserted valleys, uncanny forests, abandoned villas, old temples, stormy seas and solitary river-banks etc. The non-human characters such as howling jackals, roaring tigers, hooting owls, and screeching bats create the perfect atmosphere of awe and wonder. Moon, moonlight and moonlit nights play magic upon human psyche, often blurring the vision of recognition between the real and the marvellous. This is best exemplified in stories like "Friends and Strangers" and "The Bridge in the Moonlit Night". Thus, creating the

atmosphere of magic and mystery for man, Das raises the curtain of the supernatural which is an integral part of life.

In the works of Das, juxtaposition of the opposite elements of life, both in the foreground and in the background, develops an air of mystery and ambiguity. He attempts to show the reader the everyday world in new and unfamiliar ways and to reach what is today referred to as a hyper reality or an altered reality through his use of myths and legends, fables and folk-lore, occultism and mysticism, fairy-tales, supernaturalism, spiritualism, the oral literature and many more strategies of magical realism. Elements of human experiences that influence personalities in real life are often emphasized by him: dreams and fantasies, fancies and imaginations, feelings and emotions and subconscious and spiritual. Russell observes, "His world has the fullness of human psyche, with its dreams and fantasies, its awe and wonder, the height of sublimity can be courted by the depth of the fictive. He proves that the reality is richer than what realists conceived it to be" (*World of Manoj Das*. Web).²

Das uses powerful paradoxical images to investigate the relation between the worlds known and unknown. By using the powerful narrative strategies he rediscovers the human soul that lies buried under a fake physicality. Using magical realism as a narrative device, he overcomes the boundaries of human understanding and knowledge that are always enveloped by the ordinary reality. He presents us a new world beyond objectivity and ordinariness of this visual world.

Note:

1. See Das, Manoj. Interview by Kishwar Ahluwalia.
2. See "As a Short Story Writer in English".

Works Cited:

- "As a Short Story Writer in English". *World of Manoj Das*. n. d. Web. 21 Sept. 2012.
- Das, Manoj. Interview by Kishwar Ahluwalia. "Despatches from the Slow Lane". *The Indian Express*. 3 June 2001. *ExpressIndia.com*. Web. 15 Aug. 2012.
- Das, Manoj. Interview by P. Raja. "On His Creative Process". *World of Manoj Das*. n. d. Web. 20 Sept. 2012.
- Mohanty, Sachidananda. "Stories (the) Grand Mother Told: 'Magic Realism' in Contemporary Oriya Fiction". *The ICFAI Journal of English Studies* 1. 3 (2006): 7-11. *SSRN.Com*. 23 Jan 2008. Web. 18 Sept. 2012.
- Raja, P. *Many Worlds of Manoj Das*. New Delhi: D. K. Publishers. 1993. Print.