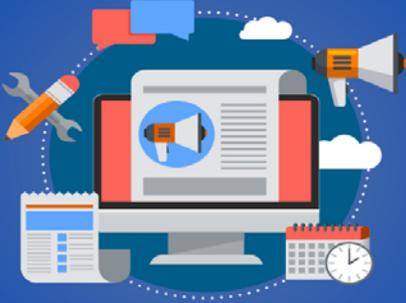


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## Syed Manzoorul Islam's *The Merman's Prayer*: A Postmodern Interpretation

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### **Abstract:**

A literary critic, writer and former professor Syed Manzoorul Islam is perhaps the only bilingual author who brings newness in his writings. He is unique in constructing plot and characters. His artistic use of diction and plain language in his short stories draw a catchy attention to the readers. He uses postmodern techniques in his widely read short story "The merman's Prayer" in a way that takes his writing in another dimension. This paper explores how the readers make a close connection to the characters as every human being is struggling with real world crisis and as it is related to their own native culture. This story starts with the absurdities of urban lifestyle and ends with the quest of happiness in an ideal world. This way the readers can exceed the boundary between dream and reality. Overall, this paper analyzes the postmodern elements in "The Merman's Prayer".

**Keywords:** Escapism, Flashback, Magic Realism, Native Culture, Postmodernism.

### **Introduction**

Postmodernism shows serious attention to the marginalized people and it emphasizes on the instability of everything and the creation of realities. Postmodern interpretation is essential in this article because it represents Shekul Arefin's insecure and uncertain life in the real world and his quest for happiness in the ideal world. This paper discusses escapism, flashback, native culture and magic realism incorporated in Shekul's life. Bangladeshi English fiction writer Syed

Manzoorul Islam, unlike most other fiction writers in contemporary Bangladeshi literary arena, celebrates postmodernity in his writings and, thus, with tremendous storytelling technique and postmodern perspectives, has enriched the field of Bangla literature in English. The context of this paper is to find out postmodern technique and its ins and outs in “The Merman’s Prayer” which elevates the author’s position from other contemporary writers. The objective of this paper is to unfold the fugitive youth, Shekul Arefin’s love story with a mermaid after being rejected by Farzana, a real-world human. It also describes the protagonist’s metamorphosis into a merman for escaping from the cruel, real world. How the cruel reality of life determines a man to escape into an ideal world is represented in this paper. This paper also includes the flashback of Shekul Arefin’s life which explores the survival procedure in this mundane world. Therefore, imagination and reality are juxtaposed here so nicely that creates a bridge between them. Moreover, it also discovers the writers’ intention to globalize the local culture and its ethnicity that the readers become familiar with another culture. By using the qualitative research method this paper analyzes postmodern elements including magic realism, flashback technique, native culture and escapism and so on. Overall, this article minutely observes Syed Manzoorul Islam’s excellent use of postmodern techniques and its’ implication on his eminent short story “The Merman’s Prayer”. The protagonist wants to escape from the real world because it is full of uncertainty and his life is scattered by the greedy attack of river and poverty which is represented through the local cultures. That’s why escapism, flash back and cultural representation are evident in this article. Moreover, the article offers Shekul’s desire to find happiness in an imaginary world, magic realism is also evident in this paper which is an integral part of postmodernism.

### **Escapism as an Artistic Device**

Postmodern fiction writers generally use escapism as an artistic device in their writings. Syed Manzoorul Islam, a prominent postmodern fiction writer in Bangladesh, uses escapism artistically in his celebrated short story “The Merman’s Prayer”. He, like an escapist, tries to avoid the hard realities of life and wants to live in an imaginary world. Thus, he creates a hero, Shekul Arefin, who wants to avoid the hard realities of life and wants to live in an imaginary world with a mermaid. At the same time, he is dissatisfied with the real world which is full of anxiety and lack of true love. The weariness, the fever and the fret of the world of reality make him feel unhappy.

He wants to fade away and to dissolve from the world of reality. Thus, he decides to join the mermaid and becomes a merman himself.

Shekul gathers a number of bitter experiences in different phases in his life that leads him to avoid the real world and to take the ideal or imaginary world. First, the nature itself of real world was not favorable to Shekul and his ancestors. The once affluent extended family becomes scattered by the river's greedy attack. So Shekul had to take the responsibility of his family and drifted to Dhaka and found shelter in a slum. To fulfil the needs of the family, he loses his long-cherished integrity. Thus, he takes decision to avoid the real world and to take the ideal world, where true love is available, no chance to lose integrity, and no anxiety exists there, with the mermaid. Secondly, though he is an ideal lover, he does not find ideal love with his beloved Farzana Afroz. After getting the chance to marry an emigrant engineer, Farzana silently rejects Shekul. Her words bring tears in in the eyes of Shekul. But it's not new thing in Shekul's life. As Islam says, "But loss and suffering were not something new in Shekul's life" (Islam 280). Farzana expresses her grief to Shekul with emotional words but it does not create any sympathy for her. As Farzana says, "I'll always pray for you, Shekul. My heart will always cry for you" (Islam 280). If she truly loved Shekul, she could not leave him. Thirdly, Shekul fails to protect the honor of his sister Tuktuki, the beauty queen of the Meghna. Again, for the marriage of his sister, he has to manage a lot of money in an unethical way. To him, this unreal world forces him to commit misdeeds. He comes to realize that the real world is a sea of suffering, pain, and anxiety. So, he prefers imaginary world to real world, that's free from suffering, pain, and anxiety. Finally, Shekul finds true love with the mermaid he encountered. He comes to understand that the real world is an ugly one and it cannot provide permanent beauty to him. Only the ideal world can give him pleasure and it is proved by the mermaid, who is a symbol of stunning beauty. Here Shekul's idea echoes the idea of Keats. As Keats says, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", --that is all. Ye know on earth and all ye need to know" (Keats 49-50).

Shekul realizes that in an imaginary world, a merman can enjoy the life with the beloved. So, it's better to die at the hands of the mermaid than living in the real world which is full of sin, suffering, pangs, pains, cruelty, anxiety and what not. He finally escapes from the real world and takes the ideal world by jumping into the sea water with the mermaid. Thus, he becomes an escapist like John Keats, who expresses the power of imagination to pass from the real world to the ideal

world with highly figurative language like, "Away! away! for I will fly to thee, Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, But on the viewless wings of Poesy" (Keats 30-32). Syed Manzoorul Islam finally takes the path of ideal world and rejects the real world. He ponders that the real world will create a disaster to him through the activities of its people. People are making biological, social and cultural assault in the real world. They are polluting the most important element of the environment, water, by throwing waste into it. As Islam says, "There is a small problem though- the maritime traffic between Chittagong and Singapore uses the channel that lies to the west of the island, which makes it quite polluted, and dangerous too" (Islam 293). The real world is getting dangerous to live day by day. Thus, Islam takes the world of imagination and avoids the world of reality. Here Islam's thinking echoes the thinking of James Joyce who avoids reality and chooses aestheticism as stated in his novel *A Portrait of The Artist As A Young Man*.

### **The use of Flashback Technique**

Syed Manzoorul Islam incorporates a number of postmodern elements in his writings. In *The Merman's Prayer*, we find Islam's own narrative style, 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrative, and immense use of Flashback technique. This story starts with real world setting and ends with imagination. Islam prefers ideal world to real world because real world is full of chaos. Thus, he creates such a hero, Shekul Arefin, who also chooses the ideal world as the story progresses. As the story opens, we find Shekul Arefin at Urmila Hotel in Chattogram. Through a series of flashback, we come to know the ins and outs of his life. He is a qualified graduate working at The Great World Trading Company and has recently been charged for stealing company's 7,25,000tk. He is forced to do it for the sake of the family. Once he had a strong family background, but with the ravages of nature it broke down. The mighty river Meghna has uprooted themselves and now they live in a slum. So, we cannot call him dishonest one. As Islam says, "Shekul was certainly not dishonest" (Islam 279). Shekul steals company's money for arranging his sister's marriage. If the groom had not demanded dowry, he would not have stolen the money. So, the cruel society has forced him to steal the money. The so-called society fails to ensure the safety for its inhabitants. Shekul's sister Tuktuki, who wants to take the responsibility of her family like Shekul, is abducted and mistreated by Mursalin, the terror of Donia. After the incident, she turns into stone, suffers from loneliness, and sees no dreams. As Islam says, "Mursalin set Tuktuki free after five days, but she was quite a different person by then. She had turned into stone, her eyes looked dry and lifeless and her voice

seemed to have disappeared in a well of loneliness” (Islam 282). If the society had ensured the safety of Shekul’s family, Mursalin would not have the chance to abduct her. So, Shekul would not have stolen the money to arrange the marriage of his sister. Through another flashback, we come to know the fact that Shekul is betrayed by Farzana, his beloved. He loves Farzana truly, but does not find true love with her. It echoes William Shakespeare’s famous statement, “Frailty, thy name is woman” (Shakespeare 11). In order to find true love and to avoid the chaotic world, Shekul finally takes the ideal world and becomes a merman.

Islam’s technique of using flashback can be compared to William Shakespeare and William Golding. Both Shakespeare and Golding are the masters of using flashback technique. In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, we find an ample use of flashback technique through which we, the readers, come to know the main incidents of the play. Also, in Golding’s *Pincher Martin* we find the use of flashback techniques through which we come to understand the character of the protagonist Christopher Hadley Pincher Martin and the past incidents of the characters. Islam, through flashback technique, also unfolds the past incidents of Shekul Arefin and his family in the story, “The Merman’s Prayer”.

### **Use of Magic Realism**

This paper also focuses on Manzoorul Islam’s three-decade long career where he shows his mastery in magic realism. This narrative style helps him transcend the boundaries of Bengali literature and it has become an integral part of his stories. He becomes the Gabriel Garcia Marquez in our ethnic culture that sets him apart from many of his contemporaries. Syed Manzoorul Islam has owned many hearts by his exemplary writing “The Merman’s Prayer” where he shows his predominance in magic realism. Magic realism explores the very essence of truth and through the use of new combination of fact and fancy draws attention to the act of creation. It’s a literary genre that relates surreal, creepy and dream like tales as if the events were commonplace. The narrator speaks of the surreal in the world of magic realism so naturally it becomes real. In general, people heard stories about imaginary characters and world. They don’t meet with the characters in reality. The surreal characters live in their fancy world. Magic realism creates a space for magical world in the real world that people come to believe it real.

The protagonist of “The Merman’s Prayer” has gone through this specific genre, magic realism of postmodern techniques. Here the narrator can travel into a new world which is

completely different and unfamiliar to the real-world people. The imaginary and real-world settings emerged at one point. When somebody is deprived of worldly happiness and expectations, he wants to find it in other way whether it is real or not. Shekul Arefin goes through the same experiences in his life. When he is rejected by Farzana, his beloved one, he wants to replace his lost love to a mermaid, Rehana Akhter though it is quite incredible to him. Shekul was actually confused whether it exist or not. The author presents it in the way like, "Shekul almost fainted. Don't blame Shekul- you too would have reacted the same way. For what he saw was absolutely other worldly" (Islam 286). In this short story, a fugitive youth is in quest of love in a mermaid and finally decides to join her by becoming a merman itself. Magic realism has a criterion of making the boundaries of reality and imaginary world invisible. Here all the imaginary events become so natural and realistic that the readers are convinced by it. When the mermaid told her name, it seems so familiar and common to the protagonist as well as to the readers. Meeting with a mermaid and having conversation with an unworldly creature makes him reach the initial shock and hearing her familiar, native name provides him another shock. These incidents have unfolded in a way to the reader that they admit it as a real setting. Islam presents this magic realism so vividly here, "The mermaid confounded Shekul by saying that her name was Rehana Akhter. 'Who gave you that name?' Shekul asked, after he had absorbed the initial shock" (Islam 287). Moreover, Shekul's prayer for becoming a merman, the police officers' query about the shadowy figure that whether it's a mermaid or not affirm the idea of magic realism.

### **Celebrating Native Culture**

Syed Manzoorul Islam has got a large leadership in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. He introduces certain complex range of cultural differences and indigenous practices through his writing. The setting, plot and ethnic representation of a particular culture are the common features of his stories. His artistic use of diction and representation of native culture distinguish him from other contemporary writers. Focusing on the native culture is another important postmodern technique. Syed Manzoorul Islam is one of the most influential fiction writers in Bangladesh who employs his focus on native culture in case of storytelling. Syed Manzoorul Islam bears similarity with Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe in many segments of his writing dealing with native culture and historical and political events. Guthrie in a study entitled *Language and Identity in postcolonial African Literature* says, "A case study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for language

attitudes, reveals that, an author's linguistic stereotypes can affect his writing and promote cultural bias" (Guthrie 2011). Both of them represent socio cultural context of Bangladesh and Africa through their writings.

The writer, professor and critic Chinua Achebe uses Igbo languages, proverbs, metaphors in his widely read novel, *Things Fall Apart* to reestablish his own native culture and its heritage. By using their own language Achebe helps the readers relate to this complex Igbo culture. The Igbo words are merged into this text in a way that every reader can understand it. The unfamiliar words such as "Chi", "egwugwe", "ogbanje", "obi" become familiar to the readers easily. The readers can share their cultural thoughts and ideas through this writing. Achebe represents Igbo religion and culture in an artistic way so the readers can get to introduce with other culture. For example, "Chi" is represented as the personal God who becomes more complex with the development of the story. Hence, "Okonkwo", "Nwoye" "Unoka" several African names make a bridge between the reader and particular Igbo culture.

Syed Manzoorul Islam also provides a native flavor through his writing by using the political and cultural history of Bangladesh. In the editorial page of "Dinkal" a popular newspaper of Bangladesh, there is a phenomenal history of Bangladesh regarding the father of the nation, Bangabandhu and his contribution in the country's liberation in 1971. Moreover, the mermaid "Rehana Akhter" and other characters like "Mursalin", "Tuktuki", "Nitai Burman" and the daily newspaper "The Daily Ittefaq"; the setting in "Cox's Bazar", "Saint Martin" etc are related to Bengali native culture. Basically, everything denoted in "The Merman's Prayer" is related to Bengali culture and its' context. Syed Manzoorul Islam's mastery in focusing on the native culture makes his writing universal. The author represents an authentic Bengali story that effectively bridges the cultural and historical gap between the reader and Bengali society.

## Conclusion

Postmodern literary writings always deal with some catchy features like- use of magic realism, flash back technique, escapism, native culture, rejection of grand narrative, real world setting, etc. Syed Manzoorul Islam's "The Merman's Prayer" fulfils almost all the features of postmodern writing and this paper has tried to incorporate all the features. This story starts with the absurdities of urban lifestyle and ends with the quest of happiness in an ideal world. The story develops through the flashback of the hero Shekul Arefin's life which explores the survival

procedure in this mundane world. This mundane world forces him to avoid the real world which is full anxiety and chaos, and forces him to take the path of imagination which is full of true love and happiness as stated in John Keats', one of the prominent romantic poets and who is recognized as poet of beauty, poetry. Islam also uses both reality and magic to create a fantastic world here. Imagination and reality are juxtaposed here so nicely that it creates a bridge between them. This way the reader can exceed the boundary between dream and reality. Moreover, the writer globalizes the local culture and its ethnicity that the readers become familiar with another culture. This paper explores how the readers make a close connection to the characters as every human being is struggling with real world crisis and as it is related to their own native culture. By reading this article, the readers can gain more knowledge about postmodernism and crisis and absurdities of postmodern people.

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