

Reading Magical Realism Intertwined in the Social Fabric of *Alik Manus* or *Mythical Man* by Syed Mustafa Siraj

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Abstract: The term magical realism has always been fraught with multiple interpretations. When we look at the large corpus of postcolonial novels, especially the Indian novel *Alik Manus* or *Mythical Man* in question, we discover how the societal fabric, interpersonal relationships, and religious disorders all get intertwined within the broader perspectives of magical realism. The complex and variegated notions of magical realism not only percolate deeper as part of an emerging economy and mode of resistance against cultural orthodoxy, but the novel also becomes an appropriate document of the voices that have long been forgotten in history. So, studying magical realism in *Mythical Man* is also about the major foregrounding of the complexities associated with realism itself. This paper discusses the course of literary binaries, realistic voices, and magical apprehensions that are constantly pitted against each other. There are instances of sheer primitivism in underlining how myths make rural stories survive across the rugged landscape of Bengal (in the Asian context). The English translation is not just of myth and realism, but it is an adept presentation by the author how political rivalries, dislocation from one's farming land, black, white, literate, illiterate, civilized, savage all undergo multiple forms of transformation. Magical realism in the novel insists on incredible incidents that are related to the lives of the common people who worship not just the totems and ancient gods, but who also worship the *buzurgpir* (the old religious leader) as an earthly reincarnation of the Almighty. From an earthly individual, the religious man thus becomes a mythical man.

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INTRODUCTION

The art of novelistic narratives sometimes becomes extremely congealed when it tries to convey anything through a monochromatic

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lens; studying magical realism in the larger socio-political context and questioning interpersonal relationships and power hierarchies thus become an often-lengthy exercise. About the main purpose of any form of literature, Henry James has pointed out in his seminal work ‘The Art of Fiction’:

Literature should be either instructive or amusing, and there is in many minds an impression that these artistic preoccupations, the search for form, contribute to neither end, interfere indeed with both. They are too frivolous to be edifying, and too serious to be diverting... (James 1884, 505)

There are certain preconceived ideas of the power play that are constantly and largely at work when we talk of magical realism, especially if we concentrate on the artistic preoccupations and impression in general. In the simplest manner magic includes the concept of fantasy, dream, sometimes the eerie, the uncanny and the marvellous. Reality, on the other hand refers to the state of things as they actually exist. In terms of juxtaposing magic and realism, we find that the study is simply not restricted to fantastic literature. From a modern and postcolonial perspective, it can be said that magical realism produces a text which represents tensions and gaps in colonial and postcolonial understanding. Moreover, while studying *Alik Manus* or *Mythical Man* (translated from Bengali by Sudeshna Chakravarty), the novel under this discussion, we find that magical realism also recuperates multilayered voices and histories of a marginalized, colonial Indian culture. In Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the supernatural is portrayed as ordinary and the ordinary as layered with the feelings and contents of being extraordinary. Similarly, in Syed Mustafa Siraj’s novel, man, myth, mundaneness, and magic all coalesce into a complicated whole, just as tangible reality itself becomes very complex and often deceptive.

The story commences with the title ‘The Tale of the Black Spirit and the White Spirit’, verging on the depiction of how the rustic people of Maulahat (a village in India) grow up by watching the black men around them while the white man ‘startles’ them. The introduction strikes the keynote of the novel: it depicts those contrarities that are never to be resolved in the simplest possible ways. Shafi-uz-Zaman, the protagonist, and the son of Badi-uz-Zaman, (the old religious leader) the ‘Dharm Guru’ (religious leader) of the Muslims, has been ordered by the Sessions Court judge to be hanged by the neck. And

right in that perturbed introductory moment, with a careful masterstroke, the novelist takes us on an unfiltered journey to the undulated landscape of Bengal in India, the rugged terrains of the village infested with jinns (spirits), possessions, centering around a Muslim family whose head is a religious leader. Under the garb of magic tricks, stolid reliance on the 'Dharm Guru', and through the paradox of fantasy and realism, this novel tells a gripping story of a man who surpasses the ordinary ranks of the society and becomes a 'mythical man'.

BACKGROUND TO UNDERSTAND MAGICAL REALISM

Drawing inspiration from what the German art critic Franz Roh had coined back in 1925 as a distinctive form in art and painting, magical realism as a discourse and critical inquiry has experienced numerous postulates. Although we find instances of magical realism interspersed in Latin American literature to a large extent, there were other nations too that experimented with this hyper form of realism. Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka, and then later, Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* (1981), Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* (1997), and also numerous novelists of Bangladesh, including Nasreen Jahan who wrote *Urukku (The Woman Who Flew)*, 1993) and Akhtaruzzaman Elias, who wrote *Khoabnama (The Dream Epic)*, 1996) experimented with a magic realist form of storytelling. Going at par with the western canonical conceptualization of magical realism, the mode was later modified to a large extent in the postcolonial South-Asian novels. In most novels, we find relentless experimentation with diction, with the presentation, and in organizing how myths and reality need to be churned out as two exclusive parameters in the South-Asian context. For instance, in *Mythical Man*, Shafi's mother Said-un-Nissa tells him stories that are layered with myths of the fringed society and the undulating recesses of the human mind. The verbal picturization becomes more poignant with the ideas of Shafi's father being recognized as the religious leader of a prestigious order, who can create miracles: for instance, he can provide a magical anodyne to his mother's stomach ailment and can keep ghosts and spirits subservient to him. The author allows Saida to recapitulate:

Holy spirits came down from the skies at night to meet her husband in his chamber. Bright white light used to come out of the windows of that special room. Their voices were like gramophone records i.e. they were

both elemental and musical. Saida could never understand their language. (Siraj / Chakravarty 2005, 2)

The women of the household discuss in a veiled manner how the elderly *Pir* (a Muslim saint) could communicate with the ethereal beings and how even the most stubborn of the spirits worked docile under him. What ensues, therefore, in the dissemination of knowledge and magic resources is that embedded or nested narratives are formed; religious resources authenticate the historical perspectives from the elderly people of the village and contested boundaries between traditional and modern beliefs are formed.

In this connection, it will be appropriate to relate to the idea of a 'contested boundary' as put forward by Brian McHale in his work *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). He says that when we study magic realism, there is a 'dual ontology' about existence, the state of beings, and how identities are formed. Also, as Elleke Boehmer (1995) suggests, the postcolonial writers in English combine the supernatural with the local legends that were the remnants of the colonialist cultures which disturbed and unsettled them previously.

WHAT WE FIND IN *MYTHICAL MAN* INCLUDE:

i. The type of 'contested boundary' and the liminalities and interstitial spaces in underlining magic realism in the novel. Magic realism is found in the borders of the home, kitchen and the religious place; in the village, semi-rural and going-to-be-urbanized novelty of the setting and background, and also in the public debate among the natives, about which religious faith was 'better'.

ii. Reading the 'normal' and the everyday in love as a physical and emotional idea, studying a gendered community and its effect on everyday life, Shafi's worldview and secular philosophy, his father's rigid religious beliefs and the common mass with an unflinching faith that the mythical leader had an unworldly aura about him, and that he 'was a Holy Teacher' (Siraj / Chakravarty 2005, 5).

iii. The 'paranormal' and the 'supernatural' constantly exist for the readers. It is not just about the individual existence and experience that weaves the magical story and appreciates the quotidian, but it is also the exotic, the charming, the folkloric, and the hypnotic that we read in this novel.

iv. The reign of public faith as a discourse. Although the symbol of the crack on the walls of the mosque hints at fading faith with the change in civilization, yet, for most parts of the novel, the marginalized village

folks, away from the cultural onslaughts of imperialism, find solace in adhering to their traditional religious illusions.

STORYTELLING AND SOUTH ASIAN MAGICAL REALISM

Mythical Man abounds in instances of storytelling and as Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris say in their “Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s”: “magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing” (Zamora and Faris 1995, 3). In an effortless manner almost, the novelist is able to produce frame narratives of Indian folk culture. People and horses possessed by a spirit, fairies, ghastly silhouettes, light and shadow, and entities of the underworld all amplify the magic realist mode of the novel. The instances of recognizing people, in reality, are harnessed not with such gusto when they are transformed in regional narratives as possessed by Jinns (spirits). Thus, leper Abdul’s wife, for her societal non-conformity, for her wanderings across the village, and for a body that was a threat to many, becomes a supernatural rumour. The author points out an incident where Shafi during his adolescent years, and his new-found friends, the two sisters Roji and Ruku went to a pond and found a black stone in an overgrown mossy, dilapidated platform. Roji-Ruku showed him that there was only one copper *paisa* (a copper coin) on the platform, and if he could collect it. The folkloric background that we find from this part is that, if anybody touched the copper coin, that person would suffer from a charred hand forever. It is just then that Shafi has a glimpse of Ikra Bibi, who picked up the coin from the platform, but her hands had not burnt. Roji said later that she was a master of witchcraft and she was a witch. That is when Roji points out Ikra’s extra-terrestrial qualities:

Roji had also pointed out the tree on which Ikra sat at night. There was a tall *Sheora* (A Siamese rough bush) tree just outside Ikra’s house and she rode that at night after chanting a few magic words. When she climbed the tree in the darkness, she would be naked and her long hair flowing down her back. The tree would uproot itself at these magic words and go off with her to strange and distant lands. (Siraj / Chakravarty 2005, 39)

The rejection of belief is also there, when earlier Shafi did not attach much importance to the stories related to Ikra, but later on, quite consciously and skeptically also, what he thought was that, if Jinns

existed, witches could exist too. Ikra aroused his curiosity. He felt nature, supernatural, and reality all combining into one:

He knew that all days, months, seasons, the sunrise, sunset were all there because of Allah and worked according to orders received from him. He knew that one angel dragged the sun across the skies each day and that at night another angel dragged the moon along its path. (Siraj / Chakravarty 2005, 44)

There is a belief that there is some supernatural entity, some non-human force, some omnipotent, omniscient entity that has complete control of all the natural phenomena. This is in a similar way to how the Jinns (spirits) are interpolated as part of a natural cultural process, as a part of oral and mythical accumulation. A reference to this is also visible in one of the works by Salman Rushdie, where we study magical realism. Rushdie very deftly points out the true nature of the Jinn in his celebrated novel *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights*, which is almost like knowing the jinn like the tip of an iceberg. Much of what remains to be known about the Jinns is shrouded in mystery. As the introduction presents:

Very little is known, though much has been written, about the true nature of the jinn, the creatures made of smokeless fire. Whether they are good or evil, devilish or benign, such questions are hotly disputed. These qualities are broadly accepted: that they are whimsical, capricious, wanton; that they can move at high speed, alter their size and form, and grant many of the wishes of mortal men and women (Rushdie 2015, 3)

THE PLURALISTIC SOCIO-CULTURAL FABRIC IN *MYTHICAL MAN*

Mythical Man is a voluminous novel, where magical realism is interspersed across a decadent yet pluralistic culture. On the one hand, stories, ideas disseminated from one generation across another are perturbing at times. On the other hand, the indigenous narratives create powerful postcolonial combat against the multi-pronged onslaught of a western cultural pattern. Unusual stories and phenomena become concrete and objective through modes of magical realism. Through the discourse of magical realism, there is also a study of the community at hand. Even if we do not take the theoretical aspect, there is, of course, a kind of culture-specific idea and community identity that are nourished by a magic-realist mode here. There are certain terms, codes,

and denominations that are community-specific to the segments of villages in rural Bengal in India. The essence of magical realism does not disappear from stories of the *Fereshteh* or the angel. Real cultural conflicts and magical indigenous lore imitate symbolic form of myths but always do not adapt their beliefs. This conforms to Joyce Wexler's observation: "Magic Realism imitates the symbolic form of myths, but does not adopt their beliefs." (Wexler 2002, 149)

Thus, the author makes it sure as the story unfurls, that the people of Maulahat came to see the elderly religious leader because they had this conviction:

...the Huzoor (a term for someone who is respected) was known as Badu-Pir in the locality, and maybe some tales of his powers had already reached these people. They heard that spirits came to him to discuss religion, the dead responded to his greetings of Assaaimu Alaikum (way of greeting in Arabic). (Siraj / Chakravarty 2005, 22)

When we look at this formation and socio-political implication of magical realism, what becomes evident as discourse is that, the village people try to erase the force of colonial domination, and instead, create an alternative hierarchy through their own stories, flashbacks, archetypes, beliefs, and disbeliefs. It will not be an exaggeration to refer to what Ford Russell points out about archetypal criticism in this connection. While reading magic and myths that are deeply embedded in the cultures of Kantalia, Pokhra, Binuti-Gobindapur, Nababganj, Kutubpur, and Maulahat (villages in India mentioned by Siraj in his novel), the readers are not deprived of a glimpse of how to look at different archetypes existing in a culture. In his book *Northrop Frye on Myth*, Russell mentions how Frye synchronizes myth, literature, and language; and in this context, "they become a symbolic form in the more epistemological sense." (Russell 2016, 68)

The canons of types of adaptation to familiar experience undergo a massive transformation in *Mythical Man*. The sense of age, the magical, mythical, and folkloric dichotomy that is part of any age are all well-illustrated through magnified strands of descriptive patterns. These include uncorking a bottle from a river and letting the Jinn (spirit) out, state of wonder, evil spirits, graves, ablution, sin, repentance, and in the unflinching conviction that people belonging to the holy faith will never die. During these instances, reality gets submerged under the overwhelming influence of the magic and simultaneously, the magical becomes the reality. The vast,

incomprehensible passages of time, place and the potential traveller spirit in Badi-uz-Zaman is reality. How he visualizes the integration of human beings across myriad forms of cultural spaces and time becomes magical. He had a habit of not staying at one place for a long time, and whenever he left some villages, he used to address the people in the following manner:

Ye, brothers of Islam, Allah has made me a traveller for life. If you ask me where my native place is, I will have to tell you that I have none. The whole world is my native place. (Siraj / Chakravarty 2005, 6)

Hence the deeper, nuanced, segmented areas of reality and magic, mysticism, beliefs, and disbeliefs also travel with this wanderer, the man of reality who is elevated and deified to a community pedestal. So, if we consider the concept of a 'dominant discourse', then in Siraj's novel we find that the story and its expression crosses boundaries and creates a counter-culture as opposed to the dominant western notions of magical realism. The beliefs of the Indian people and their insistence on magic serve the multiple purposes of amusement, instruction, and the formation of several religious and cultural subdomains that call for individual attention.

The dominant western narrative undergoes a sea change when we have the indigenous forms of magic, story, myth, folklore, human, landscape and reality all collating into one. Chapter XI of the novel, titled 'All birds return home' starts with Badi-uz-Zaman's act of clairvoyance. Daria Banu, a woman in the village hangs herself from a fig tree. The old religious leader appeases the villagers with the story of how a Jinn (spirit) had descended from heaven to tell him all about it. And although the Jinn tried to dissuade the woman from committing suicide, she paid no attention to it. And then, the novelist points out how the community adheres importance to the words of the man with mythical qualities:

Several old men and women, living in a house adjacent to the mosque, heard the argument between the White Jinn and the Pir. They never went to sleep at night and so, could bear witness to the fact that the Pir Saheb (the old religious leader) had known about Daria Banu's death even when she was hanging herself. They had also seen a flash of light on top of the neem tree (a tree of the Indian Lilac variety) when the Jinn had finally left. (Siraj / Chakravarty 2005, 128)

SYMBOLS OF MAGICAL REALISM

Choosing and interpreting magical and symbolic paradigms in this novel become two of the most important exercises that the reader must do. Sometimes magic and realism commingle to make a clarion call for building up communal peace and harmony. At other times, magic realism as a feature in the novel also gives rise to an identity phenomenon where unsettling notions about education, Hindu identity and Muslim identity, are questioned at certain junctures. If we scrutinize *Mythical Man* and some of the short stories by Siraj, then also we find how very expansive this questioning mode is. For him, at times, magical realism becomes a study in the social and economic hierarchy, in underlining the rural marginalized sections of the society as pitted against the rising influence of the previous colonial rulers, the evils of feudal systems, or even against the covert threats of communalism. Some of his notable short stories like *Daalim Gachher Jinti (The Jinn of the Pomegranate Tree)*, or *Dakhiner Janala ebang Kata Mundur Galpa (The Story of the South Window and the Severed Head)* highlight magical realism. Heads severed from the body and still moving their eyelids and frowning, love, despair, repentance, human guilt gnawing at their conscience, social hypocrisy, fights for land, election, social injustice and corruption, and finally, the Jinns (spirits) that live in the 'Third Galaxy' (in religious scriptures, the Almighty has declared how he has demarcated an area for the Jinns in the third galaxy of the firmament) all become poignant images of magical realism in Syed Mustafa Siraj's short stories. As Ayyub Rajabi, Majid Azizi and Mehrdad Akbari point out,

Without requiring cause and reasoning, the writer uses the element of 'exaggeration' in a particular way that the extrasensory and meta-reality phenomena happen so easily that the reader does not hesitate about their occurrence. (Rajabi et al. 2020, 9)

If we look at the larger trajectory of magical realism across the recent South Asian studies and also in the realms of Native American contemporary fiction, we will see how images of cultural plurality and social hybridity are visible in these literary works. This is true of the South Asian identity, in creating a counter-discourse through methods, modes and functionality of the magic-realist patterns that are startling and casual at the same time. According to M. R. Noriega Sánchez:

The conventions of realism seem inadequate for conveying certain cosmologies, and perceptions of reality, a deficiency that Native American writers try to compensate for through their use of lore, mythic presentation and magic realist strategies.” (Noriega Sánchez 2002, 87)

As a part of our study, if we consider the two phrases-cosmology and presentation of mythic lore, we find in Siraj how the lore and the magic realist descriptive vein that we find in *Mythical Man* adequately convey an indigenous cosmology. The story starts when Shafi’s (the protagonist) standing at his trial and his flashback takes the readers back to the creation of a mythic identity. This is done through layers of history, familial dislocations, labelling the religious leader as a superhuman being, and falsity. The leader is decked under the notions of unwavering, untarnished popular faith. The collective concept of magic and reality thus become hazy and it becomes difficult to distinguish what is real and what is not. Jason Cullen explains Deleuze’s concept of reality: a) the ‘actual’ is that thing that exists in time and space: matter and form; b) the virtual, on the other hand, is an abstract and potential multiplicity that is already presupposed by space and time. (Cullen 2020, 74)

Hence, when Shafi’s imagination and belief blend with the potential multiplicity of the fact that many Jinns (spirits) are working under his father, he is tormented by the feeling that what would happen if a jinn loyal to his father goes and complains to him about Shafi’s smoking habits. What is abstract has far-reaching consequences in the novel. The ‘actual’, the elderly *Pir* (religious leader) is the mythical man, one who is not perturbed by flimsy and mundane things like the acquisition of lands or crops, but one who believes that “In this earth, those who give up being devotees of Allah and busied themselves with the measurements, etc. of land were sinners.” (Siraj / Chakravarty 2005, 65) There is no space for the virtual here, but of course, the moral conception of the indigenous narrative with a reference to sinners in the afterlife is present. It is a distinctly Muslim narrative, interspersed with the dictums of the *Faraizi* movement (a movement that Haji Shariatullah led in East Bengal to give up un-Islamic practices). A picture of a changing society and language giving rise to power and potential of the subaltern - all these are richly interwoven as part of a magic realist narrative that we find in *Alik Manus*.

The actual narrative of power structure is relatable on a simplistic model to the social story, and it also has gendered depictions and

examples of resistance by using the body as a weapon and also as a taboo. When we study magical realism and the social fabric in the novel, we find how the female is not just marginalized, but it is history, magic, storytelling, and realism that unsettle the entire principle on which the 'acceptable' forms of gender are to be included in the mainstream society. Ruku and Rozi (the two female protagonists in the novel) belong to a decent family, are married in a decent family, with Ruku having no scope of declaration or reciprocation of love for Shafi. Saida is Shafi's mother, the wife of the legendary religious figure Badi-uz-Zaman, yet who remains almost powerless, within the domestic subservience of the household, second fiddle to Badi-uz-Zaman's dynamism. There is nothing as concrete as the personal law here, the only natural jurisprudence that we receive includes good omens, cursed bodies, and highly contested issues of women's identity. The question about who the witch is, who the harbinger of madness and desire is, who channelizes temptation, seduction, and sin - everything remains a contested notion across the past and present of Shafi's story. Minor women characters like Ikran, Ayemoni (the woman who takes care of Shafi), Sunayani, the staunch Hindu lady, Aasma, the fisherman Mehru's wife, the symbol of unbridled passion and desire, Sitara, Kallu's wife - all are a part of the different sections of the magic realist mode.

CONCLUSION

The novel questions the simplistic and generalized notions of the 'local' and how it can be juxtaposed with the 'indigenous' against the myths that western civilization creates. The novel becomes a site of contestation for the non-colonial, grand unique voice of the local and the indigenous, where the history of rustic Bengal is written as per a method of correlating nation, state, boundaries, and locales. Often there is restlessness, brewing communal aspects between Hindus and Muslims in the larger backdrop of the growing Faraizi Movement, and the British autonomy that threatened both the communities. As the novel keeps on changing the backdrop, there is also a visible shifting to a more modernized and pluralistic form of magic realistic narrative. Communal and social injunctions prevail to dominate the local, subservient masses, as they still keep on having unflinching faith in the recuperative potential that the mythical man has. There is also a change in the entire social structure as the dissemination of vernacular language and thereafter, English education takes a prominent role for

communication in the society. The novel, with its abruptness and the conceptualization of supreme human will, still remains a masterpiece in South Asian literature, with a conclusion infested with questions.

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