

MAGICAL REALISM IN *THE LADY WHO DIED ONE AND A HALF TIMES AND OTHER FANTASIES* OF MANOJ DAS

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Manoj Das, the bilingual Indo-English writer of international repute from Odisha, needs no introduction to the field of literature. His fictional works has many hidden aspects among which Magical Realism seems to be prominent. 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. In the fictional works of Manoj Das we found a similar trend of theories used by these Magical Realists, mostly in his treatment of myths and legends.

The central concept of magical realism in literature is its insistence on the co-existence of the magic and the real. The narrator of the fantastic dispenses with the laws of logic and the physical world by recounting actions and incidents which may be absurd or supernatural. But the narrator of a magical realistic text accepts most or all of the actions and incidents while introducing "something else". This something is not realistic, but it is never meant to create shock effect and is woven seamlessly. Therefore, magical realism neither belongs to the realm of fantasy nor to that of empirical reality. Despite the presence of fantastic events, it is always linked with the "real" world and is grounded in recognizable reality through social, psychological, historical and political references.

In this context the entire book *The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* by Manoj Das can be taken as an example. Some of them are retold stories, but in modern contexts too they bear analogy and relevance to day-to-day situations and experiences. Thus, these stories carry the value of past, present and future. Time is cyclical and repeats itself. Das has presented a third, rather remarkable - if not actually miraculous - lease of life through the simplifying glass of retrospective vision. In this context his interview with Nandini Sahu is illustrative:

N S: You have created a new genre of stories. You have chosen some ancient stories from the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra*, etc. and have developed them forward from the points where they ended. What motivated you to launch such a series? ...

M D: The stories in *The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* were prompted by my feeling that our literature was an unbroken tradition. I saw that some of the classic stories of the folk genre – stories given to us by great minds of the past – could be an excellent base for presenting a comment or two on the present, our own conditions...¹

The volume *The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* consists of stories from the *Panchatantra* and the *Jatakas* retold by Das. The stories have the style of the magical realists who blend fantasy with reality. In this volume, 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 this volume 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.

The reader comes across animal characters in this volume that are treated like human beings and they possess many human qualities. Most of the stories of this volume are based on animal characters and their human-like behaviour. In “The Lion Who Sprang to Life after a Century,” the lion is not only wise, but also saintly. When it comes to know that its rebirth was only possible because of some human beings - Dhiman and his associates – it does not care about its dying hunger, does not eat them and grant them their lives. He says to Dhiman, “. . . I was ignorant as to who revived me. You gave me that knowledge. You saved me the sins that could have accrued me had I taken the lives of those who endowed me with life. . .” (31).

Before its death it donates its skin to Dhiman as *Guru Dakshina* since it accepts him as its *Guru*. The story is a complete juxtaposition of realism and fantasy; the realistic part shows the picture of human ego and stupidity and the fantastic part is shown by the saintly animal that completely surprises us with its behaviour.

The story “A Turtle from the Blue” is fantastic, but the characters are found in purely realistic settings. The central character is a huge turtle named Kambugriva who one day decides to fly high with the help of Sankata and Vikata, the two swans who visit him occasionally. They carry him with the help of a rod which they clutch in their mouths. The realistic point is the stupidity of the turtle that hopes to stay above others. As observed by Rama Kundu, Das’s turtle is not only ambitious, he is also ego-centric and stupid, and thus represents many a human aspirer” (*Intertext* 268).

Kambugriva, flying too high, forgets his limitations and starts replying the boys down who tease him. It results in his dreadful death and he becomes a good recipe for the king on whose palace-roof he falls down and dies.

The striking point in a story like this is that it allows one to play with ideas. It provides comfort and consolation against the pressure of real-life problems. Like all the great fairy tales, the characters of this volume of stories are delightful. These stories leave us to fantasize about life and human nature in extreme conditions. There are fanciful elaborations and exaggerations while unfolding the very realistic aspects of life. Chibber says:

Das creates a string of modern Aesop's fables, almost like the twentieth-century Panchatantra. His jackals and other animals assume modern roles which refreshingly give a rare touch of contemporaneity and also a hunting sense of some inexplicable inadequacy enchanted deep in the human fount. (*The Sunday Standard* 1979)

Among the other stories of this volume, "The Stupid Servant" is an interesting one. It is about a king who is too possessive of his pet monkey. The king needs him all the time and appoints him as his security guard, who ironically takes his life. He further proposes the queen for marriage and as a result of the humiliating situation arriving therefrom, she commits suicide. Finally, being chased by the soldiers, the stupid monkey flees into the jungle, accepting his animalism and giving up human behaviour. The story has a combination of realism and fantasy, though it seems to be a fable. Fabulation is really necessary for a magical realist to present the realistic features of the fiction before the reader. Realistic characters face fantastic situations in this story.

"Jewels from the Sky" is about one learned *pundit* who possesses a rare astrological wisdom that enables him to predict the position of stars and to shower gems from the sky through the incantation of hymn. One day, while passing through a forest with his disciple, he faces a group of bandits and is captured by them. As the last resort to free himself from them, he lets them know about his rare knowledge and power and presents them with a shower of gems from the sky. But another group of bandits appears and they demand the same for them which is beyond the power of the *pundit* to accomplish as a result of which he is killed by them. Thus, irony marks the end of the story.

"He Who Rode the Tiger" is about a wise prince who has to sacrifice his life for a group of foolish people, including his father, the king. A captivated tiger is the centre of attraction for the people of that State who compete with each other to have a ride over it. Ironically, the task is imposed on the innocent prince who is taken by the tiger into the jungle. It shows the paradox of intelligence and foolishness in the behaviour of the prince who sacrifices his very life for the sake of his foolish father.

"The Tiger and the Traveller" is the story of a cursed gold bangle that becomes the cause of a magical metamorphosis of a human being to a tiger. The traveller, resolving to put an end to his life, absolves himself from every earthly desire, and chooses a pool as his means of suicide. In the pool lives a tiger who once was also a human being and a traveller, but being fascinated by the gold bangle possessed by another tiger in that pool, he touched the bangle and was metamorphosed into a tiger since, according to the curse associated with it, whosoever touches it shall be transformed into a tiger. The new traveller also falls into the trap of greed at the sight of the bangle, descends into the pool, receives the bangle and is immediately transformed into a tiger.

The striking point of this story is that this new traveller, in spite of knowing the predicament of the previous traveller of the *Panchatanta*, does the same mistake by receiving the cursed bangle. Kundu opines:

In spite of his having figured in a later fiction the traveller of the present story cannot evade the fate of the protagonist of an earlier text, and must therefore be destroyed by the tiger. But destroyed in what way? And as answer to this query we are taken into the domain of magic realism. (261)

The realism that this story presents is about the nature of human beings that changes even in extreme situations. He begins to love life when he is at the point of committing suicide. Of course this puts him in a paradoxical situation from which there is no escape. He receives an eternal cursed life.

Das has retold the parables and fables of the *Jataka* and the *Panchatantra* in a new mode which characterizes the magical realist texts. Like the *Jataka* and the *Panchatantra* here we come across a magical landscape of plants, birds and animals, talking, suggesting, and behaving like human beings. However, unlike the *Jataka* and the *Panchatantra* its purpose is not didactic, but to unfold the varied planes of reality, not excluding the unreal and the surreal. They take the reader to another world. Even while portraying imaginary characters and describing imaginary situations, Das has given priority to realism. He has given equal importance to the events that occur according to natural laws and to others that occur according to a separate set of principles which are external to Nature. This unfolds multiple layers of truth. P. Raja writes:

Manoj Das's use of the supernatural not only serves as an indispensable part of the theme of the story but also as a means of driving home some message... He enjoys the supernatural fantasy all right, but that is more an escape into the fairytale world. He knows that the writer is demanding of him only a temporary willing suspension of disbelief – till he has hit upon the purpose of the story. (*Many Worlds of Manoj Das* 76)

Each and every retold story of this volume consists of a wide range of dense forests, wild animals and natural habitats which are in consonance with the theme of the story. The two central characters - Samanta and Abolkara, the master and the servant - take the reader, through their journey, to different lands of different times. Nature is often presented to us in a humanized form. Das begins the story "Jewels from the Sky": "The dawn was lovely, but it seemed its tender light was too shy to disturb the darkness that had so comfortably settled down in the forest" (34).

The story needs this setting as it tells about something that comes through supernatural occurring. Here one learned *pundit* loses his life in the hands of some greedy bandits. Though he possesses a rare knowledge of astrology through which he presents a group of bandits a shower of gems from the sky, yet he cannot save his life with this since he is unable to repeat it with another group of bandits. The magic of moonlight, the miracle associated with it, the effective power of the treasure, and the unnatural occurrence of that night need some special and effective setting for the retelling of the story.

The reader needs a great deal of poetic imagination to enjoy the fantastic stories like "The Turtle from the Blue," "The Tiger and the Traveller," "The Last Demoness," "He who rode the Tiger" and "The Princes and the Storyteller." All these stories have miraculous happenings which are set in marvellous atmospheres. Das writes in "The Turtle from The Blue":

Green was the valley and beautiful the lake. But Kambugriva was ambitious. Often, he looked at the horizon and sighed. . . Often, he would pass into a sort of trance and visualize phenomena that were strange: dancing trees, musical mountains, blue rivers falling perpendicularly from the clouds, men and monkeys assembled in magnificent halls debating the virtues of the tail.”(*The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* 60)

In “The Last Demoness” Das creates a combined setting of forest and village locality. He describes:

The road meandering along the foot of the mountain was lonely and since the season was spring, the flight of birds shooting towards the lush green woods looked lustier than normal, their proud communion with a gloriously setting sun. The valley breathed zest with an assorted fragrance of varieties of flowers. (19)

In “The Tiger and the Traveller” he takes the human traveller to an uncanny forest where he is metamorphosed into a tiger. The traveller is familiar to the locale, yet becomes enchanted with it. He observes:

The ancient pond in the forest looked quite familiar and in no time I spotted the old tiger holding out the gold bangle...It was growing dark. The blue-gold hue of the bangle became more prominent in the dusk. Every time I looked at it, I felt ripples of joy rushing through my veins. (55)

In “He Who Rode the Tiger” the author describes:

It was a wonderful autumn daybreak when the royal orchard on the outskirts of the capital presented the incredible sight. A rope-trap set up by the *malis* to catch a naughty boar, which regularly made a mess of the watermelon patch, had netted a tiger of impressive dimensions (92)

Das, in these retold stories, not only takes us to an imaginary marvellous world, but also creates the borderland for magic and reality to mingle together. No doubt, he is excellent in portraying wonderful atmospheres and settings in the true magical realistic manner

Das draws upon the energies of fable, folk-tale, and myth on a contemporary realistic base. The reader can find in his fictional works labyrinthine narratives and plots, extensive use of myths, legends, fairy tales and oral tradition of story-telling. His fictional works, however, do not remain confined to the fixed one-dimensional allegoric thrust while using the old tales. He strikes his own innovative creative departure from this through his fusion of orality and fabulation with contemporary realism. While maintaining the quick pace of narration, he introduces his own individualistic aspects to the original text. He is conscious that orality is a strong cultural force in any civilization and he makes worthy use of it. So, his traveller in “The Tiger and the Traveller” is different from the original one of Vishnu Sharma, and thus indicates his cultural-historical situation in some certain terms which reflects the change of time associated with post-colonial India. The traveller seems to have no escape from it, and quietly accepts the transformation.

The tales from the *Jataka* and the *Panchatantra* greatly inspire Manoj Das and he uses them to cover the cultural distance with the help of this age-old tradition of oral literature. He adds perpetual variations to these stories by setting them in contemporary realistic situations and manipulating them skillfully to produce magical realist texts. This intertextual adaptation is vividly manifested in the volume

The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies. Kundu writes, “Das’s stories also reflect a self-conscious and amused way on the part of the author of using a known fable and re-inscripting it with time, innovative ironical touches of newer fantasies or magic realism” (253).

Das captivates the readers with simplicity of his language and style, as we come across in Grandmother’s tales or the stories from Arabian Nights. He retells the stories from the *Jataka* and the *Panchatantra* with a mesmerizing quality that binds the reader with the text. Writes Geeta Doctor while reviewing Das’s short stories:

Manoj Das is a story-teller in the old tradition. There is about him the comfort of a grandmother’s lap, the spell of Scheherazade’s cliff hangers, the touch of a wandering minstrel who with a few notes of an ancient instrument takes back into time, or even just the shared joy of sitting around a campfire listening to yarns that flame and flicker with the wind until the next morning, when all that is left behind is a pile of ashes.His style has the light deft touch of an experienced fisherman who can throw his line into any water and be sure of coming up with a catch. (*Indian Express* 1981)

Some of the stories follow the discourse of tale-telling, and they are sometimes tales within tales or story within stories. One such is “The Princess and the Storyteller.” It is a discourse or narrative without any end. It unfolds inside itself. The secret of the narrator’s identity is paused at the beginning of the story and he is only introduced as a school teacher and the truth of his identity remains a mystery till the end. The narrator tells the story of a beautiful princess where he himself is a major character. He is the suitor of this marriageable beauty who possesses some extra-ordinary wishes for her suitors to fulfill. The narrator becomes victorious in this story and the arrogant princess becomes furious at her defeat. Having heard this story, which occurs within the main story, the three listeners become impatient and furious and are ready to attack the story-teller, imagining themselves as his competitors who have been defeated by him. The story seems to be autobiographical first at the beginning, but ultimately it is proved to be a self-made story only. At one time the story-teller speaks of himself as being enclosed in the story within and at another time speaks of the story as a figment of imagination only. The end of the story is described in theatrical terms, “The story-teller stood up and, suddenly fluttering open the eye which he had kept shut until that moment, appealed, ‘Patience please! All this is as true as my not having an eye’” (*The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* 91). The narrative is indeed susceptible to all the vagaries of language under the speech of the author, whom one of his listeners calls, “What a terrible chap you are!” (91). The narrator designates himself as a falsifier, the biographer of error and falsehood. At the end of the story, the instability of the narrative that all along haunts the reader leaves its final mark when we are told that “there was never a princess like that” (91). Not only are the three listeners in the story, but the readers too are shocked and surprised when they come to this point of the story. Remarks P. Raja:

That the author should have dedicated this story to “those unknown yarn-spinners of yore threads from whom have been spun upon this stuff ” is significant. The story contains elements of ancient folktales - and through the dedication, the author emphasizes the unbroken continuity in the art of story-telling that runs through the ages. The listeners’ confusion about the story-teller to be the real hero of this story is another point to be noted. Perhaps Manoj Das wishes to stress the

power of the art of story-telling - when the listeners tend to forget the borderline dividing the fiction and the fact. (*Many Worlds of Manoj Das* 73)

“The Princess and the Storyteller” is technically a tale of olden days and in this context Raja continues, “No sensible reader of his stories will doubt the fact that Manoj Das is particularly in love with plots that have a tinge of fantasy in them. It is because his mastery lies in telling a story, and in doing so he makes it believable for his readers” (71).

By the reversible manoeuvres of the inside and outside of the story, Das literally and literarily turns inside out the traditional western narrative of empirical reality through the use of the supernatural. He attempts to disintegrate the discrete elements of the traditional narrative by reconstituting the very flaws and imperfections that exist in the system. Here, Das speaks of the agony and ecstasy of life as well. As we see, the listeners sometimes jump out of pleasure when any chance of the narrator’s defeat comes and they react at his victory. He penetrates into the psyche of the individual and focuses on the perversions and miseries of life. The technique is ironic here, as in many of his stories, which fulfils the revealing of multiple realities. While the fantasy of the story provides entertainment to the reader, its suggestiveness focuses on the very core reality of our instincts and urges.

Manoj Das’ treatment of magical realism embodies a complex vision of reality which is an extension of the quotidian, everyday objective reality. His world view is an intense exploration of reality to yoke the opposites like the natural and the supernatural, life and death and the real and the surreal. It is more deep and true than the perception of reality found in realistic fictional works what we find from the fictional works of Das.

Note:

1. See Das, Manoj. In Conversation with Nandini Sahu.

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