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DECENTERED NARRATIVES: STORYTELLING AND MAGICAL REALISMASSURVIVAL TECHNIQUES IN AMAR MITRA'S *DHANAPATIR CHAR*

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Abstract

In the gendered location of the subaltern(s), the voice of the subaltern, if heard, is always centred around the male voice. Spivak's subaltern who is the female is neither allowed access to the dominant discourse nor given an apt voice (Asayesh 1). The subaltern woman is always the "muted Subject" (Spivak 91). In the interaction between the dominant and the subaltern discourses, there is a space known as the 'third space' where a new form of language is created to represent and visualise cultural hybridity (Bhabha 65). The language and symbolisms imposed by the storytelling technique of magical realism act as that space in the context of dismantling the patriarchal hierarchy and decentering the dominant narratives of agency and sexual desire. Through the critical examination of the novel Dhanapatir Charby Amar Mitra, this paper will attempt to evaluate how storytelling is used as a means of survival for the inhabitants of an island. In the novel, magical realism confronts the language of the dominant patriarchal culture through the voice of Dhaneshwari and asserts its identity while establishing a revised culture of negotiation and representation.

Keywords: Feminism; Hybridity; Gaze; Magical Realism; Patriarchy.

1. Introduction

Incorporating magical realism into fiction was as much a literary trend as a political requirement of a postcolonial structure of society. The response towards imperialist domination of groups of people had inadvertently erupted in colonised regions and communities. The binary oppositions the Western philosophers and writers created between the West and the 'Other' were challenged by the rise of magical realism as a method of storytelling. Originally considered a part of Latin American literature, magical realism transgresses boundaries of representation and enters various postcolonial regions as a voice of protest.Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity is cemented upon using the magico-realist language as the primary language of a postcolonial

subject (Asayesh 31). In these texts, there is a constant foregrounding of a form of narration which includes "gaps, absences, and silences produced by the colonial encounter."(Slemon 13). These gaps and absences are spaces of resistance to the dominant discourse. The reason behind Bhabha's focus on this genre is its ability to break the barrier of discourse between the dominant and the subaltern. As it does not fall within the ambit of strict definitions, it can defy the norm with the help of a creative space of exploration of identities. Magical realism involves engagement with the supernatural element, which creates a make-believe setting and enables the disintegration of the barriers of the belief systems imposed by the dominant cultures. It is for this reason that it became one of the primary modes of storytelling in a postcolonial world.

The most prominent modes of representing reality in magical realist fiction are the decentring of power relations, the dialogic crossing to forms other than the 'self' and the establishment of a new world order.Writers like Salman Rushdie and Isabel Allende have created a space in this kind of fiction which challenges the standard form of storytelling and representation of society. They defy the power structures created and perpetuated by the West. There is a constant confrontation between the rationalism of the West and the supernatural/spiritual as the mode of life of the other nations. Challenging the idea of Enlightenment, the magical realist mode presents the reality within the garb of the supernatural and the myths.Closely associated with anthropological concerns and cultural concerns of reality, this mode allows us to confront the questions of cultural hegemony and the postcolonial predicament; it exposes the matrix of power relations(Aldea 4).In so exposing, it helps in the decentering of the hegemony which has been normalized by the West/the dominant discourse. Wendy Faris also focused on this idea of subverting power relations by the magical realist fiction of the postcolonial world. It helps in the creation of an alternative mode of thinking about the world (Aldea 6).Through it, the historical aspects of oppression and control are revealed and negotiated.

Magical realism is put to use as a method of narration by feminist fiction also as it enables the dismantling of the patriarchal hegemonic structures and assertion of individual identities of the female entities engaged in the relationships within this framework.Amar Mitra's *Dhanpatir Char* stands in the middle of the discourse on magical realism and the impact of authoritative control over marginalized regions by the State. The gendered subaltern is the woman whose voice is repressed by various other dominant voices but there is a regurgitation and return of the subaltern female voice through the course of the novel. Sexual exploitation of women is highlighted along with this idea of return. The body of the female acts as an island of desire focusing on its needs as well as dreams of a better future. It subverts the gaze of patriarchy and

tilts its weight towards a reformation of power structures while breaking stereotypes and playing with the alternatives available through the valid mode of storytelling. Weaving a narrative of control is at the centre of this dismantling.

2. Aspects of the *Char:* Contextualizing the Island as a Paradoxical Space

The entire action of the novel *Dhanapatir Char* takes place on an island/char in the Sunderbans. The novel combines elements of myth and folklore and combines them with the harsh realities of the conflicts between the State and the people of marginalized communities and women. Dhanapati, the protagonist, ends up on the island carried by a storm and rules the island for several years, negotiating in various forms with government officials. Through his mythological storytelling, he imagines the island in numerous forms and keeps weaving stories to survive. After he turns blind, sensing the immediate threat of losing control of the Island, he hands it over to Kunti, his young wife who is later known as Dhaneshwari. The novel revolves around the attempts at survival and resilience of Dhanapati and Dhaneshwariby subverting of various power structures across this land of conflict.

The island is a location which cannot be easily described in the novel as it is not a permanent settlement. The island opens for six months and remains closed for the other half. Chars are hybrid landscapes that change with the action of the river. Kuntala Lahiri and Gopa Samanta designate these chars as "part land and part water, but neither fully land nor fully water"(Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta ix). These landscapes are volatile spaces which are completely dependent on the river's movements and currents across time. Since they are situated between bodies of water and land, they create a hybrid environment of borderless states which become ungovernable by the dominant state. Politically, these pieces of land are beyond control; they have their system of functioning and being. The hybridity of the char enables the creation of an alternative arrangement of means of survival and modes of being. It creates a metaphorical realm which transgresses the limits of imagination in the dominant mode of thought. It denies the creation of binary oppositions between nature and culture and creates a fluid boundary between the two.

Amar Mitra describes the island which is six and a half leagues away from Ghoradal in a similar manner. It is located at the estuary of the Bay of Bengal, somewhere related to the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh. This island of Dhanapati (the storyteller and owner of the island) comes alive in the seasons when rain doesn't destroy everything around the region. A common feature of the chars is their possibility of being washed out completely during the monsoons, thus creating an environment which is quite volatile for human relationships to flourish. Mitra describes the volatility of the environment as a narrator,

> The island will simply vanish, not leaving so much as a speck on the water underneath thecanopy of the sky. The sea will become one with the rivers in the north, east and west directions; the sea will engulf them (Mitra 2).

This looming fear of complete annihilation is a constant reminder of the environmental action on land and its humans. Such a landscape, therefore, needs to have alternative stories of survival and resilience. Such spaces of existence are paradoxically marginalized from mainstream society (in the novel, the mainstream is Ghoradal). The landscape of the char is a part of the real riverbank but is always distanced from access by the people of the mainland. The island offers a possibility for reconciliation as well as avoidance. Reconciliation is of identity assertion of its residents and avoidance is of the epistemic violence of the dominance of the mainland. This creates a paradoxical situation. In the beginning, they are engaged in obeying the orders of the government officials who come from Ghoradal. At the same time, the resistance towards such oppressive structures expands through figures like Batashi and Dhaneshwari who defy the norms of the society. Therefore, an alternative mode of survival is created on the island.

Through Dhanapati and later through Dhaneshwari, thealternative mode of being is explored. The unique arrangement of a six-monthduration of accepting husbands who have left their wives and turned towards the river for their survival creates a dent in the dominant structure of the legality of marriage. The relationships are fluid and cannot be held in control by the state, as and when required. The structure of legal marriage is shattered. This system enables the women of the land to explore their desires with approval from the owner of the island, that is, Dhanapati.The administration technique of Ghoradal does not work to perfection on the island and the system is inverted. The imposition of the system of extracting taxes from Dhanapati and permission to engage sexually with the women of the island is inverted as Batashi resists the approach of Dashrath Singh, the trader of female bodies. Batashi, the first voice that we hear from the people of the island, is a voice of asserting one's identity, in a land which is not owned by the government.Through Batashi, the char expresses its own creative identity which is not confined by the limits posed by the administration. The discussion between Batashi and Mangal Midde (a representative of the government) where he jokes about her identity as a 'fisherman's wife for six months'(Mitra 19) is a point from which we can understand the rupture between the two different systems they come from.The ability to create their own identities and bring changes within the conventional system is spurred by the location in which they reside, that is, the island. The residents of the land "straddle the borders of legitimacy and illegitimacy"(Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta xii). Mangal Midde and Dashrath Singh are representatives of the legitimate world

whereas Batashi and Jamuna are representatives of the illegitimate world, from the perspective of the mainstream society.The char enables a mingling and a separation between these worlds, therefore acting as a fluid environment. The paradox builds on to create defiance, resistance and dismantling of rules.

The legitimacy of marriage is associated with two other things. The first is the permanence of events in one's life. This permanence is not possible on an island which helps people survive for only six months of the year before the monsoons. Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta claim, "Neither do chars become a permanent "home" for immigrants, nor do the *choruas* (people residing in the chars) continually strive to leave the chars and settle elsewhere"(Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 19). Like the char, which is in constant flux, the lives of the women on the island are in constant flux. Though they can escape their worlds of sex work (in Kolkata and Sonarpur), they are hounded by the idea of the permanence of the escape.There is a constant 'coming back' to the island. The lives of the *choruas*are enmeshed within this departure and return. Their desire for the legitimacy of marriage and obtaining a twelve-year deal with their respective fishermen on the island is highlighted. The second is the legitimacy of their identities as individuals with a voice, rather than being treated as objects of lust and desire, as in the mainland of Ghoradal. Assertion of identity merges seamlessly with the desire to have a family life on the island. Along with these legitimacies, there is a merger of the political history of the chars of Bengal which were used as locations for the settlements of the immigrants and refugees after the Partition. It is for this reason that Batashi's identity is dubious for Dashrath. Her background seems to shatter the idea of the political borders and the condition of refugees in different parts of Bengal.Between the intricacies of these legitimacies, the survival of the char and the woman of the chartravels back and forth.

3. Storytelling as a Means of Survival: The Individual Cases of Dhanapati and Dhaneshwari

Dhanapati, the person after whom the island is named, is a storyteller who weaves the tale of the creation of the island through his imagination. The act of narrating about the past and focusing on the creation and ownership of the island is seen as one of the major events that occurs in Dhanapati's life. The unique nature of these stories that he tells his people are not homogenous stories. They transgress the boundaries of meaning or chronology, defying time and events. There is a constant retelling of the story of the creation of the island by Pedru (the pirate) who was the original Dhanapati. The revision of the stories of origin and search for identity in a contemporary situation provides a voice and acts as a means of survival.Dhanapati can be looked

at as a guardian of cultural memory and its transmission across generations. Dhanapati is the original resident of the island and the mediator between the government and the rights of the people on the island. The alternative arrangement of order is maintained by him. Combining the folklore of the land with the reality of the people and their stories, Dhanapati creates the island again and again, in his imagination. He resembles the tortoise on the back of whom the entire universe resides and as he moves, the world faces its turbulations. In many indigenous communities of India, the myth of the tortoise is significant in the creation of the world around us. Similarly, in Hindu mythology, the earth is supposed to be supported by four elephants who stand on the back of a turtle. Vishnu is one such deity who is associated with the tortoise (*kachhapa*) who holds the weight of the world on his back.Dhanapati narrates the story while saying,

> When sleep evades me at night but my senses are dulled by it, I can make out that I am underneath the sea and there's blue water around me. Fish come and poke me everywhere but I cannot move because I have to hold the island safely on my back (Mitra 99).

Dhanapati, holding the weight of the world (the island) on his back is a symbol of the connecting force between the world, nature and the past. This is an act of protection. On the other hand, it is also an act of legitimizing one's story. The indigenous narrative about the world is merged with the dominant Hindu myth of the tortoise to legitimize the story.There is an amalgamation of the little tradition with the great tradition, as studied by Robert Redfield in his sociological study on peasant's lives. The influence of one on the other is felt as an assimilation of cultural thinking. In this aspect, the retelling enables the legitimization of existence across generations. In the act of retelling, there is not only a personal narrative but also a cultural memory associated with the community (Wang 36).

In retelling the story in numerous versions, Dhanapati creates a world fuelled by fantasy and magic. In all these many versions, Dhanapati acts as the owner of the land.Ownership and survival are complicated terms, in the context of the novel.Since he owns the land, through his stories about its origin, he has the power to make decisions for the people of the land. He doesn't resist the encroachment of the government into the affairs of the island directly, or is unable to 'speak truth to power'. His ownership is a figment of imagination, created wholly employing stories.When Nabadwip Malakar arrives for enquiry regarding the arrival of police on the island and how the people of the island have resisted them; he wants Dhanapati to agree to the use of the female bodies as objects of pleasure for the people representing the government. In this case, Dhanapati cannot register his disagreement. It is a means of survival for him as he understands

the intricacies of the government policies and the powers they own. Through the control over the land, the government wishes to establish the discourse of truth which considers all bodies of land and human beings are within the ambit of power of the government. It continuously highlights the right to interrogate people over resistance throughout the novel. Dhanapati's thoughts while engaging in the enquiry initiated by Nabadwip reveal his fear of losing ownership of the land and the people,"Government was all-powerful and could do anything. It could destroy village after village, killing many. Government brought on such misery for the greater good"(Mitra 139). Dhanapati had played within the government's rules and had always fed their greed through money and taxes. The fear of loss of power over the island as his only asset loomed over his personality. Dhanapati's ownership is, thus, vague and incomplete. Also, like the government, Dhanapati is continuously weaving the truth of his ownership of the land. Homi Bhabha describes this event in the context of postcolonial existence as an act of mimicry (Bhabha 152-160). He appropriates the government and its power structures for survival and attainment of his desires on the island. In such cases, Bhabha observes,

> A desire that, through the repetition of partial presence, which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority. It is a desire that reverses "in part" the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer's presence. A gaze of otherness, that shares the acuity of the genealogical gaze which, as Foucault describes it, liberates marginal elements and shatters the unity of man's being through which he extends his sovereignty (Bhabha 129).

The desire to own the island is at the core of the agency that both these figures embody (the government and Dhanapati). This desire can be equated with the mimicry of the postcolonial subject. In both these cases, the sense of maintaining the power structuresis invented and perpetuated by the people in power. Dhanapati owns the island owing to his experience over the years of the landscape and the government owns it as a consequence of power. Dhanapati and the government are mirror images of each other.

On the other hand, the idea of agency and ownership has been interpreted on a different level by the women of the island. Batashi doesn't own the island but has clarity regarding her agency and ownership of her own body. As Dashrath reveals that she has been sold off by the government and that her body is now owned by the people of the government, stripping her of her rights to defence, she resists vehemently. She refuses to go with the trader and says, "I won't go, government. It was not right to sell me off without asking me"(Mitra 104). Her agency and

control over her own body help her find a voice of her own. By sending the trader and the policeman away from the island, the residents of the island reveal the ownership of the island by the people. The disruption of the six-month arrangement on the island by any external force was not allowed. In return, all the powerful people were sent away from the island by the fishermen and the women inhabitants.

Kunti, the young lover of Dhanapati and the figure who later becomes Dhaneshwari in the novel represents the voice of magical realism and creative and sexual agency. She starts weaving stories of the origin of the land, following the footsteps of Dhanapati. Her stories are far-fetched, entering into the world of magical realism and revealing a world of desire and agency. She weaves the story of her journey to Kamrup-Kamakhya which has made her a witch. Her desire to learn witchcraft to drive the external force of the governments away from the island is highlighted in different parts of the novel. Her existence and her arrival on the island become a mystery. She tricks Nabadwip Malakar into believing that she is a witch and drives him mad with anxiety and fear. She stages a body protest to save Batashi from the male gaze of Malakar and tricks him into sleeping with her.She keeps singing her lullaby for the government which makes him sleep instead of taking advantage of her. She weaves the story of the exchange of the personalities of Batashi and Kunti to save Batashi. Her sexual agency is revealed as she desires to not only sleep with Dhanapati but also bear children for him. She reveals her sexual desires by trying to sleep with Malakar. In the last part of the novel, she also attempts to enter into a sexually intimate relationship with Aniket.

She is bestowed the power of ruling the island after Dhanapati by him. She is named Dhaneshwari. Dhanapati weaves the stories of Pedru the pirate, Goddess Laksmi and Mother Mary and puts Dhaneswari within this fantastical world of creation and destruction of the world by women and goddesses. Dhaneshwari becomes a representation of the power of the female in a patriarchal set-up. The song of her transition from Kunti to Dhaneshwari pointed at the dismantling of the power structures and formation of a new world order,"The old order changed and Dhaneshwari came,/ The sky, sea and land were hers to tame"(277). When Aniket (the BDO) comes to the island, her creation of imaginary tales in the world of magical realism becomes a space of protest against the government. She changes the rules of the island, makes the women wear veils to save them from the gaze of the men from the government, she keeps "all women veiled when the government is around so that he cannot choose easily", in brief, trick the government. The actions of the government are criticized, especially their hounding after women and selling them off to traders for business, pushing them into the world of prostitution.

The stories of Maa Kamala, Pedru and places like Lisboa from where Pedru had arrived on the island. Dhaneshwari is an inheritor of the stories bequeathed upon her by Dhanapati and she plays with them to represent her reality, on the island.

Dhaneshwari transforms into a voice of protest, not only through stories but also by revealing the reality to Dhanapati who had acquired the ownership of the island by force. She convinces the government to provide her with the rights of the land (*patta*) which would make her desire to stay within the ambit of security for the entire year rather than for six months only. She is considered a traitor by Dhanapati but doesn't stumble in her resolve.She had devised ways of inviting the government again and again into the island to make the island her permanent home. Aniket, a member of the government gets sucked into the lore of Dhaneshwari and had given in to her desire to own the island. Dhaneshwari had to confront the futile efforts of the BDO who couldn't convince the government about giving a lease of the land to Dhaneshwari Dasi. The DM had ordered a complete evacuation of the island, a complete annihilation of the place. In response, she continued weaving her lore of floating away on the back of Dhanapatiand saving herself from disgrace and powerlessness.

The use of magical realism in the novel helps reveal an inner matrix of oppressive structures and a subsequent protest against the same. Mitra incorporates two contrasting ideas to reveal these structures of power which need to be overturned. One is based on the rational view of reality, and the other is based on accepting the supernatural as part of everyday reality. The supernatural, in the novel, are the stories of survival and proliferation across generations, through people like Dhanapati and Dhaneshwari. The supernatural element of magical realism is not disturbing. It doesn't alter the structure of the universe. One of the many reasons behind the acceptance of these stories by Malakar, Mangal Midde or Aniket is that land is constituted not only by its people but also by the stories, myths and folktales they weave around their habitats.In *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Wendy B. Faris refers to magical realism as a significant mode of expression throughout the world, especially in postcolonial cultures, because it has supplied the literary background for important cultural work(Asayesh 27). Magical realism helps in giving voice to marginal voices and suppressed creative traditions. In the novel, the act of storytelling and bringing existence into being is the creative tradition that is given prominence. As a part of most oral cultures and non-literate cultures, this is a prominent mode of being and survival.

4. Conclusion

Storytelling is an act of creating a microcosm of the universe. In this novel, Amar Mitra uses magical realism to reveal and subsequently dismantle the structures of power. The oppression of the government, the trading of women's bodies and the land rights of people who reside at the margins of mainstream society are at the core of the novel's matrix. Through the stories created by Dhaneshwari and Dhanapati, the world on the island comes into existence and survives through different seasons, defying the norms of the political structures of an urban centre. The encroachment of the government upon indigenous land is focused as a primary event on an island. Mitra also closely weaves the problems of geopolitics and the volatility of the environment of the chars, their aspects of borderlessness and cultural hybridity of being. The novel transitions from an imaginative story to a revelation of the politics of being and belonging, from myriad aspects.

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