

THE MAGICAL REALISTIC VISION IN THE FICTIONS OF MANOJ DAS

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Abstract

Manoj Das offers a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws of reality, though his fictional world is not separated from reality either. In his attempt at an intense exploration of reality, he focuses the scientific reality with psychological human reality by incorporating such aspects of human experience as thoughts, emotions, dreams, cultural mythologies, imaginations etc. to yoke together the opposites like natural and supernatural, life and death and real and surreal in components of his fictional works. He delves deep into the magic of being to reveal an insight into the unexpected richness of reality which is deeper and truer than the perception of reality found in realistic fictional works.

The vision of an artist is how he envisions life and the world. Vision is born out of an intense awareness of life and a profound perception and subtle understanding of truth and reality. Magical realist writers show in their works how magical realism can broaden and change a reader's perception. The reader's own beliefs pass through a modification as the writer encourages him to see the new and different objectives of reality. There is an exploration of the "other" reality with fresh enthusiasm and a rare investigation into the people, traditions and philosophies. Zamora writes:

Beyond the particular symbolic energies of magical realist texts are their conceptual concerns: vision is often a theme, as well as a narrative strategy; magical realist texts conflate sight and insight and thus collapse the literal and figurative meanings of "vision." So I propose this generalization at the outset: magical realism is characterized by its visualizing capacity, that is, by its capacity to create (magical) meaning by seeing ordinary things in extraordinary ways. (*Zamora. pdf* 22)¹

Manoj Das has successfully used magical realism to stretch the boundaries of realism which adds dimensions to the definition of reality. In his writings magical becomes ordinary, admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. But no matter how elastic it is, magical realism stays grounded in the phenomenal world, unlike fantasy which is set in the unreal world.

The vision of Manoj Das is mostly humanistic, apart from its magical realistic attitude. It presents the sad story of humanity by communicating the tender and lovely world of imagination with the hardness of reality. Here innocence and hope are often betrayed by cruel anti-human forces.

Das' magical realist works embody a complex vision of reality which is an extension of the quotidian and objective reality. In his magical realist works he portrays the real world having marvellous aspects inherent in it, thus creating an awareness of the unknown, supernatural planes of reality. Shukla writes about Das' fictional world:

It is macabre, mysterious, mythological and occult. It is also dream-like, as if woven by *Maya*. An Indian persona has a different and distinct pair of eyes. He has a consciousness, forward or floating in the collective matrix, rising to the surface or hidden in the subliminal, which looks at reality as an ever-living complexity of a variegated whole. (*Reflections on Indian English Fiction* 89- 90)

As a true magical realist he offers a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws of reality, though his fictional world is not separated from reality either. In his attempt at an intense exploration of reality, he focuses the scientific reality with psychological human reality by incorporating such aspects of human experience as thoughts, emotions, dreams, cultural mythologies, imaginations etc. to yoke together the opposites like natural and supernatural, life and death and real and surreal in components of his fictional works. He delves deep into the magic of being to reveal an insight into the unexpected richness of reality which is deeper and truer than the perception of reality found in realistic fictional works. The world of Manoj Das is varied and complex. Writes Samal:

It is a world of fable and fantasy, history and mythology, mystery and mysticism, fairy-tale – prince and princess, king, queen, minister and courtiers, supernatural characters like ghosts and apparitions and subhuman characters like crocodile, tiger, turtle and monkey, holy men like Baba and Sage, occultist and necromancer and a thousand other mysterious phenomena. (37)

Magical realism is a kind of realism, but is quite different from the realism that is mostly accepted in our day-today world. It is not speculative and does not conduct thought experiments. Instead, it tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective. Das investigates these realities in his dealing with various themes. Parveen comments, "He excels in ...the depiction of the contemporary society, politics, superstition and above all in coming to terms with reality" (213).

There is the extinction of the boundary between reality and fantasticality in the character portrayal of Das. The ordinary meets the marvelous and the marvellous becomes the ordinary most of the time which is the distinctive feature of magical realism.

Magical realist fictions depict the real world of people whose reality is different from the ordinary. Magical realism enables the reader to see the world through a different vision. This vision enables the reader to see the seemingly unreal elements as real. Das presents this different vision to the reader through his portrayal of the characters like Sadanand, Ashok, Hiranmoy, the seven seekers, Kunja, Laxmi, Lily, Abolkara and many more.

Das creates a distinct and separate world of children within the world of the elders. The beauty of the children's world is enhanced by their inner beauty and their innocence enables them to see the world differently.

In “Lakshmi’s Adventure”, the little girl Lakshmi, during her communion with the deity, develops a vision which enables her to humanize the goddess. By bringing the deity to a human level she establishes an intimate relationship with her. Thus, Nature is mingled with the divine in a smooth and profound manner. The little heart is opened with endless faith and heavenly innocence that is not ordinarily possible for an adult. Her one-sided conversation with the deity about her trouble with arithmetic, her father’s poverty and her mother’s sorrow is usual for her, but unusual for an adult. Her level of discussion is so intense and genuine that it obviously parallels her consciousness to that of *yogis* and *sadhakas*.

Das presents a wide range of visions that come from the clash between the world of innocence, curiosity and simple faith of the children and the world of hypocrisy and complexity of the elders. He stretches his outlook beyond the usual speculations. The monkey’s notorious activity of picking up the minister’s cap is seen by the child-observer and so the succeeding drama enacted by Shri Moharana and Babu Virkishore puts him in doubt about the truth and the seeming truth. The story unfolds the gulf between appearance and reality in the world of the politicians.

In these stories Das transports us into the world of the children and for sometimes we remain absorbed in their world. We see the beauty of this world with wonder and become overwhelmed with the beauty of the heart and mind of the child - characters. What leaves us more enthralled is the possibility of an inner growth that they exhibit. In this, they become the path-finders for the adults. Das explores the mind of his child characters and discovers this possibility in them through his unique way of looking at things.

Quite contrary to the innocent world of children, another world is presented that belongs to some crazy adults like the seven seekers which are neither desirable nor welcome. These people announce themselves as the seekers of wisdom, but this search leads them to a surreal world which is quite impregnable for them and stands beyond their understanding. In the three consecutive stories the reader goes through a number of mystic and mysterious experiences along with them. The author very cautiously shows us their moral degradation step by step which culminates in a rather terrible and pathetic way.

In the first story of the series “A Night and a Dawn in the Lives of the Seven Seekers,” the seven seekers, in spite of their age, position and status, spend an unusual night in the haunted villa. They get drunk and go wild. One of them even feels like flying which is quite impossible, and soon he meets the reality when he bumps into the mirror. The effect of the haunted house creates abnormality in them and animalism is ejaculated from their inner selves. The author’s point of view is very clear: when man without extra-sensory power tries to confront with channels unknown, he fails even to perceive the simple reality. Everything becomes blurred and man fails to distinguish the boundary between the real and the magical.

In the second story “The Sage of Tarungiri and Seven Old Seekers,” the author presents a mystical world of wonder and mystery against a bizarre world of vicious worldly people. The mystical surprise is given through Tukan baba whose mystic weeping and smiling connect him with god’s beautiful creation. His divine rage is manifest through his possession of supernatural agents that drive the ugly souls away. Here the author tries to differentiate between the divine and the mundane and to show that the distance between them is very little for a person possessing a vision to see beyond the ordinary reality. The *Yogi* has that vision, the disciple has also that understanding, but the seekers do not have either. Where the amalgam of real and surreal takes place with the *Sadhu*’s smiling at the moon-rise, the very demarcation between the

two is incomprehensible for the stupid worldly men who are bereft of the unique vision to comprehend it.

In the last story “The Last I Heard of Them,” the world expands from reality to surreality and then to total unreality. Obviously the boundary has broken between these worlds and it makes the seekers crazy. Their thirst dwells on getting miraculous experience which is granted by Hidamba Baba, the mystic, but in the process of attaining super-vision from vision, they forget the basic rule of divine obedience and in turn invite a violent consequence for themselves. This throws them out of the boundary of divine bliss and it transforms into a divine curse for them. The result of their ugly desire to see people without clothes through the aid of miraculous vision results in their perceiving a mass of moving, dancing and racing skeletons, and in culminating with their lunacy, dumbness and death. The simple fact is that we all bear our skeletons under our beautiful skin. So the real nudity is exposed by our skeletons and this is the reality beyond reality which the claimants of perceiving super reality fail to understand. The vision we get from this story is very clear from *Sadhu* Lambodar’s words:

Miracles would give you a temporary faith in miracles. That too, not without a lot of confusion and even danger following them, particularly when they are performed by people who, I warn you, are by no means men of God. It is only, for very sincere seekers that anything could be an occasion for waking up to higher realities - even miracles by non-spiritual occultists. (*Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories* 79)

Thus, when blessed with simple miracles by the Baba who presents two different tastes of the same thing, the curious seekers are amused, but it is beyond their capacity to face the higher reality, i.e. human beings are the skeletons of their own selves.

The vision that magical realist texts provide are very different from the everyday objective vision. It presents the view that the world includes miracles, angels, fairies and spirits which are treated as real like the other things of our daily life. But, at the same time, the whole world is considered as enchanted and mysterious. To convey this, the magical realist writers treat the ordinary as miraculous and the miraculous as ordinary. It reminds the reader that the world is surprising and is full of design and purpose. It is evident in “Farewell to a Ghost” where a whole village takes a ghost for granted as their co-dweller without any doubt or suspicion. The reader, too, does not consider it as a fantasy or a superstition, because the border of reality and super-reality is dissolved in his imagination. The human world and the supernatural world become one and the same. Das’ village is like the family in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* that normally accepts a ghost as its co-dweller. The ghost’s departure, the farewell she receives, and the concern and sympathy of the villagers for the ghost in “Farewell to a Ghost” is no less realistic than it would have been in case of a living being. Without any element of surprise or doubt, the villagers perceive the magical reality or the total reality and completely surrender themselves before the invisible reality. The miraculous, on the other hand, is described with a precision that fits into the ordinariness of daily life and makes the miraculous seem almost mundane.

Magical realism is a distinctive form of fiction that aims to produce the experience of a non-objective vision. Its techniques are particular to that vision, and while they may at first look like the techniques of a sophisticated fantasy, they, in fact, convey realities that other people really do often or occasionally experience.

Das presents a rare vision of mysticism and occultism through his characterization of *sadhus* (mystics) and *tantriks* (occultists) in some of his stories. Through the possession of many supernatural powers these characters connect themselves with the other world and stay aloof

from the mainstream everyday world. They always create wonder and surprise in others who live in the day-to-day world. Das exemplifies this in his novel *Cyclones*. When Sandip does not believe that *Sadhu* Soumyadev is a centenarian, *Sadhu* Sadanand, the disciple of Soumyadev, answers him:

... but I have known hermits older than Soumyadev. What is unnatural or supernatural about it? Most of them live in the Himalayas, cut off from the strain and stress of life, even if we do not take into account the time they pass in states of blissful trance. They do not suffer the pangs of passion or the vagaries of emotion. For long stretches of time they even remain oblivious of the fact that they had a body at all! What is surprising in their calmly tiding over a couple of centuries? (105)

According to common belief the mystic is associated with something clear and positive whereas the occultist is mistakenly linked with something shady and negative. Das makes a clear distinction between *Yoga* (mysticism) and *Tantra* (occultism) in his book *Myths, Legends, Concepts and Literary Antiquities of India*. He describes:

One of the most misunderstood - partly because it is most misused - lore of Indian mysticism is the Tantra. Basically, the aims of both yoga and tantra are the same: to pierce through the veil of appearances and discover the Reality. But the methods were different. Yoga concentrated on the urgency of the soul's union with the Divine. For that the seeker generally found it convenient to withdraw from the mundane activities, to avoid getting entangled in the affairs of the world and to concentrate on his aim (though such attitude of aloofness was not supported by a broader vision of yoga, for example the yoga taught by Krishna to Arjuna in the Gita).

Tantra took a different and daring approach to Reality. Nothing could exist – not even that which is obviously illusory - without a Divine principle hidden deep within it. A plunge into the magic and spell created by Nature – but a conscious plunge without forgetting for a moment its purpose – can help the seeker discover the hidden Divine splendour supporting the phenomenon. That will be a direct way to the goal, without having to avoid anything.

So, the practitioner of tantra dared into the dusky citadel of Nature, to explore the secret principle that sustains it, but perhaps nine hundred and ninety-nine in a thousand lost their way in the labyrinths inside the citadel. (168)

In the portrayal of Hidamba Baba, Tukan Baba, Sadhu Lambodar, Saint Soumyadev, Raghav Sharma, Pundarik and many more *tantriks* and mystics, Das has made this vision clear. Whatever be the medium, to attain miraculous power for destructive purpose is always forbidden. The violation of the Divine rule always brings disasters as it happens in the lives of the seven seekers. This complex vision of reality is unfolded by Das through the elements of fantasy.

The postcolonial concepts are treated with tremendous authenticity and particularity by Das. The characteristic fusion of realistic and fantastic elements that originated during the post-colonial period is characterized by the co-existence of irreconcilable opposites, i.e. dominant rational-scientific “western” and marginalized mythical “native” world views. The author presents non-western systems of thought which aims at supplementing the dominant world-view and redressing the cultural hierarchy imposed by the colonizers on the colonized.

Das' fictional world suggests that cultures cannot be neatly divided into rational versus irrational, or scientific versus magical, or real versus imaginary. His forceful narrative presents the magical and metaphorical modes of thought to influence people's perceptions and decisions just as objective "facts" decisively shape psychological and social reality.

Das often juxtaposes the soothing fairy tale world with the disturbing everyday world of common people. His vision is very clear: the veil that separates the real from the imaginary is very thin and once it is separated, it becomes very difficult for the characters to face the truth. Though the level of perception of children is different from adults, they both find it difficult to confront reality. The story "The Intimate Demon" clearly illustrates it. Here the author is the narrator who, along with his little daughter, is on a train journey and in the absence of his wife, considers himself as the mother-substitute of his daughter. He succeeds to lull his daughter to sleep after great efforts and hence is very much serious about her sound sleep. An intruder comes in and starts playing flute much against the wishes of the father. Magically, the note of the flute takes the daughter into a fairy land where she perceives the flute-player as a little boy. The father, not being aware of this invisible fact, drives the flute-player away lest his music should disturb his daughter's sleep. The flute-player unwillingly leaves, and the effect becomes disastrous. The girl immediately rises up and complains against a ferocious demon that drove away the little musician in her dream and thereby forcefully broke her dreamy sleep. This makes the father speechless who is not able to evaluate the fairness of his act. Here, the child's perception as well as the world she lives in, is obviously different from the father's. What is purely nonsense and disturbing for the adult is very sensitive and necessarily entertaining for the child. It is the vision that forms the value system. The seeming contradictions are often blended in Das and he succeeds in creating a world of his own which are accepted by the readers as real and whole. Samal writes:

The microcosm of Manoj Das is a close and compact world governed by its own laws and regulations. It is an all inclusive and homogeneous world, based on an intimate relationship and understanding between man and animal; natural and supernatural; the mysterious and the realistic; and the extraordinary and commonplace. It is a self-poised, self-possessed and self-satisfied world ("A Tale of Northern Valley," "Old Folks of the Northern Valley," etc). More or less it is a static world that refuses to change or changes very slowly from its cozy euphoric state. (39)

Here, not only the human and the subhuman, but also the natural and the supernatural co-exist. The ghost in "Farewell to a Ghost" shows man's uncanny fascination for the unseen and the unknown. The story presents the traditional belief and ethos of the community. The ghost has become an innocent and indispensable part of the life of the villagers. When the tree in which the ghost is left to dwell is struck by lightning, it marks the disintegration of the superstition of the villagers. It suggests a farewell to the culture and the innocent belief that had nourished their existence. In the said story Das also tries to fuse the present and the past through the depiction of his childhood memories. Relating to Das' writings, Mishra and Tripathy observe:

Men and manners of people come gently under his scythe. He blends realism and phantasy in his short fictions to project his satiric outlook as well as to increase the readability of the texts. The combination of realism and phantasy helps him to create the past as well as the present. His technique of employing the memories of his childhood days makes the

various episodes alive and interesting and creates faith in readers. (*A Critical Response to Indian Literature* 149)

Many incidents from Das' childhood memories present the supernatural in a convincing manner and connect the reader with the other world. In *Chasing the Rainbow*, he describes his experiences of the other world in his childhood when one new boarder of his mess confronts the ghost of that mess:

One night the shriek of a new inmate of Dolly Mess woke up the others. The boy had just been admitted and probably knew nothing about Dolly. He was in the process of falling asleep when the apparition of a small girl in a yellow frock drew close to his bed. 'How dare you sleep on my poor doll?' it demanded.

Since the boy hesitated to get up, the apparition stretched her tiny fingers – which looked as golden and soft as the petals of the *chompuk* flower – and tried to pull the boy up by the hair. That was when the boy shrieked. (66)

The mingling of the natural and the supernatural is very deftly accomplished in "The Man Who Lifted the Mountain". Along with awe and wonder through the effects of the supernatural, here he presents a world-view of the sixth sense present in human beings. The narrator visualizes the whole story through a dream and enters into a fantastical world in which there is another narrator, i.e. the Mountain itself.

The writer adopts two voices in his stories. In one he shows the traditional ways of life, customs and beliefs; in the other, he exposes the ways of modern life and their consequential devastating effects on human beings. Man has become an escapist while simultaneously searching for his self. In "Preface to the Future"- a speech – Das says:

Today's man is so preoccupied with his present that the future remains behind the curtain of his vision. He is not ready to ponder over the future because he feels it is very uncertain, and even a little inward thought digs out memories of a past burdened with agonies and woes.

The 20th century had begun with a hope that science and technology will establish a paradise on earth, and that the great ideals of democracy and socialism will abolish the enslavement of man. But today we see that most of these hopes have not been fulfilled and man still remains as unhappy as before. In fact, man's search for happiness leads him to newer needs, which are being created by merchants who make money by promoting their goods and eventually by selling dreams. (*FacenFacts.com*)²

As westernization affects our people and culture, the rootedness and self-identity seem to be lost somewhere. The hope of attaining individualism and liberty and of reviving the cultural tradition and human values remains a distant possibility. It generates the urge for returning to Nature. The author shows it in the actions of Sadanand, who finds peace inside a well; Sandip, who searches for the meaning of life with the company of mystics in the forest; Kunja, who finds freedom by plunging into the sea; Lily, who sleeps forever in the lap of Nature; the watchman's son, who loses his life by claspings the fury of Nature and the like. It is not only a fascination for the unknown world and the unsolved mysteries, but also an escape into some dreamland of liberation and solace. The fictional writings of Das unfold these possibilities.

Notes

1. See Zamora
2. See Writer in Spotlight

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