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Abstract

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that, with the odd and honourable exception (such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*), the current Indian English fiction boom-boom depends heavily on two distinctive 'narrative styles' – a kind of domestic realism and a kind of magic realism. Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth (in *A Suitable Boy*), Arundhati Roy (to an extent) and so many others usually paint in a more or less 'realistic' idiom on a middle class domestic canvas. On the other hand, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra, Rukun Advani and a few others take recourse to various devices of magic realism even when their framework remains a kind of middle class domesticity. There may

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There may be many reasons why a particular writer inclines towards one of these two tendencies. But there is only one reason why these two tendencies largely define the limits of Indian English narration today. That reason relates to the relationship between the writer and what s/he sets out to write about. In other words, given the 'Babu' (anglophone, very urban(e) middle class) backgrounds of these writers, they can only write in so many ways about an India which also contains, say, 'Coolies' who are not English-speaking and middle class and often not very urban(e). Or they can only write about so many types of Indians. The advantage of a kind of domestic realism is self-evident: it enables the depiction of Babu realities, with Other realities accessed from a Babu space. The domesticity narrated is always middle class, mostly urban, often English-speaking.

A kind of magic realism, on the other hand, enables the writer to narrate Other realities, without really doing so. Magic realism, in this context, can help the Babu writer avoid certain problems of narration just as much as domestic and conventional realism. For one, it often helps the writer deny final authority to any extra-literary reality, while appropriating those aspects of that reality which are useful and accessible. It also enables the author to present his/her own 'fabulous' version of even those aspects of extra-literary reality that are appropriated. The advantages from the perspective of language alone are immense: one can adopt whatever (intra)language one wishes, one can cheerily refuse to be either exact or consistent, one can even avoid confronting the issue of language and representation. It is within the magic realist tradition that Vikram Chandra, for example, can

'address' the issue of narratability (complicated by both class and cultural elements in the following extract) in the way he does and get away with it. Here is one of Chandra's narrators explaining how Sanjay — then ignorant of English — could narrate what another character, the British Hercules, had said in English:

Sanjay hears it, and it is his blessing, or power, that, even though he doesn't understand what is being said, he hears each word, each sound, a crystal-clear, separate entity On learning the meaning attached to these symbols, years later, he was able, then, to discern what Hercules had said that afternoon.... (218)

Of course, at a deeper ideological level, certain uses of magic realism are themselves predicated on the myth of the 'Truth value' of non-causality and irrationality — which can also be seen as the myth of the 'Falsehood' of the very possibility and necessity of history. As (among others) Terry Eagleton has argued, this myth is not necessarily a redeeming one. While the questioning of official history and the overturning of received systems of 'knowledge' serve a radical purpose in an unequal and exploitative world system, the abandonment of the very idea of history or systematic knowledge is a recipe for the kind of subjectivism and vulgar relativism that (at its worst) turns intellectuals into ostriches sticking their heads in the sand.

As the above examples and comments indicate, style and ideology are mutually constitutive. The style of domestic realism or magic realism cannot be read within the Babu-Coolie context in isolation from ideological factors — both being enabled by existing and institutionally situated discourses.

Having noted some of the problems of fantasy and 'reality' in magic realism and conventional realism respectively, it is also necessary to acknowledge the genuine elements of narrative concern on both sides of the realism-fantasy 'divide'. Perhaps this has been best addressed by Mukul Kesavan in *Looking through Glass*, a brilliant first novel that received favourable reviews but was unfortunately overshadowed by the inordinate publicity accorded to some other first novels published in the 1990s.

To begin with, a bid to counter 'official history' need not end up in a dismissal of the common body, of human agency — as both Amitav Ghosh and Mukul Kesavan illustrate in different ways. Kesavan's *Looking through Glass* (1996) is essentially a trip back to 'official history' — a re-examination of the colonial and/or nationalist versions of the 'Quit India' movement in 1942, ending with the independence (and partition) of India in 1947. What Kesavan achieves in the process is *not* the dismissal of history, *not* its erosion in favour of personal anecdotes and newspaper reports, but an examination of the various other versions and elements of human agency that have been left out of 'official' accounts.

Kesavan's narrative is hinged together by magic realist devices: the central one being that of a contemporary, nameless Hindu Babu narrator falling through the lens of his camera into the past, into 1942 to be exact. But while these, and other,

'magic realist' devices facilitate the telling of the narrative and make important points of their own, the 'history' of the Indian struggle for independence is not excised in favour of a merely personal world. What is questioned is the hegemonic aspect(s) of this official history. For example, the novel tellingly re-inscribes the agency of peasants (in the only extensive act of rebellion depicted) as against the *assumed* leadership — and lack of action — of Babu students and teachers (108). Such non-pejorative reinscription of Coolie agency is rare in Indian English fiction — though it can be read in the works of other language writers, such as the Bengali Mahasweta Devi.

Connections obscured by colonial and nationalist rhetoric are also restored in Kesavan's novel. These include occasional metaphors and acts such as the unnamed Hindu narrator-protagonist learning Urdu in 1942 or noticing the important Muslim month of fasting, Ramazan, for the first time in his life only in 1942 (204). They also include more sustained metaphors and narratives, such as the coliberate mixing up of Hindu and Muslim identities throughout the novel, and the very subtle but constant undermining of the Babu (three different Babus to be exact — the narrator, Dadi and Ammi) nostalgia for the Raj, the common Babu tendency to view the Raj as a pre-lapsarian stage for Babu agency. The Babu tendency towards self-protection and isolation in the face of 'Other' Indian realities is itself faithfully echoed by the Babu narrator: but as the novel goes on, the Babu narrator not only gets more involved with his 'new family' but the narrative itself ends on the symbolic note of the narrator changing from a photographer of (present or past) Indian realities to a presence (though blurred) in one of his own photographs:

I had learnt some lessons too, from all the pictures I had taken and not figured in After I lined them up, I twisted the timer and raced for the space between Bihari and Masroor. They were further away than they had seemed through the viewfinder and the shutter caught me on the turn.

But I am there — which is the important thing. In the kneeling row, between Bihari and Masroor, that turning blur is me. (374–75)

More centrally, the entire issue of partition is depicted from a fourth (and often obscured) perspective — not the 'official' colonial European perspective evoking the 'inherent divisibility' of India in the absence of Eurocentric cohesion; not the 'official' Indian perspectives stressing the villainy of Jinnah or the 'backward fundamentalism' of Muslims; not the 'official' Pakistani perspective stressing the villainy of the Congress and the 'fundamentalism' of Hindus; but the fourth perspective of Muslim Congressmen, the men and women who 'disappeared' (literally in the novel [47; 243–46]) due to the Congress's unwillingness to recognise their existence and who remained opposed to both Jinnah's Pakistan and the Congress's vision of a socio-politically homogenised 'India' (228). In the process, however, the history of India — the sequence of events leading up to partition and independence — is narrated carefully and with the painstaking exactness of a

historian (which, by the way, is also Kesavan's vocation in 'real life'). Here, magic realism is *not* a device to escape from the necessity of faithfully narrating a complex and at times 'alien' world, but a device to relate it well and more completely. And in the process, the other side of 'official history' is revealed, without dismissing history-as-human-agency. As the time-and-space-travelling narrator puts it: 'historical hindsight [is an] ... unreliable guide to individual history' (210). This perception of the unreliability of 'official history' ('historical hindsight' as taught to a post-1947 Indian) is a celebration of, shall we say, 'lived histories' — not (as it increasingly is in Rushdie) a dismissal of history and the past, *nor* (as it often is in V. S. Naipaul) a denial of the possibility of history to the post-colonial 'margin'.

This revision of history is carried out on many other levels as well, such as in the very different stance that Kesavan's narrative takes on religion as human agency. For example, as against Rushdie's narrative of the Quranic verses which could be changed without the speaker (Mahound, in *The Satanic Verses*) discovering the switch, Kesavan offers a side-narrative in which a similar switch is impossible — largely because both the agents concerned share similar discourses even though one of them is illiterate (44). Such examples can be multiplied.

In general, then, Kesavan's narrative is deeply aware of the fact that it is problematic to prefer either 'reality' or 'fantasy' — or, to introduce some unfashionable Marxist terminology, the fact that such a preference is itself a mark of alienation. Human agency — also in terms of human objectification — cannot be dealt with on only the material (often considered the only 'reality') or the symbolic (often confused with fantasy) level. Alienation is itself the term that explains why and how the material and the symbolic (and the 'real' and the 'fantastical') are seen and constituted as unrelated to each other. This explains why Kesavan's novel is basically different from, say, Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (which can easily be read as a dismissal of 'realism' in favour of a kind of personal fantasy-cum-fabulism) in its attitude to reality and fantasy, realism and magic realism. Kesavan remains suspicious of both in certain (alienated) forms, without dismissing either. His novel employs and resists elements of both realism and fantasy in its narration (as noted above). However, it is in the story of Parwana, a major female protagonist, that this becomes explicit: as the narrator puts it, 'Poor Parwana! Ravaged in the name of realism, then ravaged for the sake of fantasy' (199). The exclamation relates to the rape of Parwana, who has first almost been burnt on a funeral pyre to satiate the craving for realism of a film director and then sexually and physically ravaged by two characters living out their own private fantasies. To this extent Parwana can be seen as a personification (though she is also much more) of human agency, of the physical body, of lived histories, of the present that cannot be without a past or a future. It is this human body and human agency that is 'ravaged' by alienation in every field — by alienation as marking a disjunction of the ideal from the physical, the symbolic from the material, the 'fantastical' from the 'real'.

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