

# Magic Realism as a 'Postcolonial' Device: Facilitating a Link Between the 'National' and 'Personal' in Exploring Hybridity in Nina Sibal's *Yatra: The Journey*

**Kakoli Debnath**

Alumna, Tezpur University

Assam, India

## **Abstract**

Magic Realism has been a significant influence on major postcolonial writers. Evolved as a separate movement in literature, the term 'Magic Realism' comprises of the binaries of opposition - 'Magic' and 'Realism' characterized by the use of fantastic and marvelous events in a mundane setting. The term came to be increasingly associated with colonial histories and the postcolonial politics. Magic Realist novels are deemed to be fundamentally 'historical' and 'political' texts observing the geo-political margins and colonial histories of the world. As a postcolonial discourse, magic realist texts are characterized by hybridity, questions of identity and fusion of the binaries of fact and fiction, space and history and the personal and the political or national. Nina Sibal's *Yatra* acknowledges the imperial history of colonization and nationalistic politics through the magic realism narrative. *Yatra* is a political novel that facilitates the fusion of Indian partition history and politics of imperialism through the technique of magic realism. The paper is an attempt to witness magic realism as a 'postcolonial device' to analyze the elements of hybridity, redefine Indian identity by forging a point of view specific to the historical events of India and to explore the role of the 'postcolonial female' in nationalistic politics by establishing a link between the 'personal' and the 'national' in Sibal's *Yatra*.

*Keywords: History, Hybridity, Magic Realism, Partition, Politics, Postcolonial Feminism*

## **I**

Postcolonial Literature engages critically with a history of oppression, colonialism, cultural violence, partition and injustice. As a literature of critique and emancipation, Post colonialism surveys the themes and issues from formerly colonized spaces. Post coloniality examines the representation of other cultures and the strategies of resistance that countries of Third World like India adopt to investigate the control exerted by the imperial forces of First World developed nations. Therefore, the term 'post colonialism' refers to a strategy which resists oppressive colonizing practices and at the same time seeks to understand how oppression and resistance occurred during colonial rule. Post colonialism examines the treatment of cultural diversity in relevant literary works and celebrates 'hybridity' of individuals and groups belonging to different cultures. Post colonialism adopts a form of discourse associated with a political perspective which opposes the effects of colonialism on the literary context. The socio-

political approach of 'post colonialism' and its double nature can be contextualized by the words of John McLeod:

'postcolonialism' recognizes both historical continuity and change. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonization. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity to change, while also recognizing that important challenges and changes have already been achieved. (33)

The technique of Magic Realism has a unique position in postcolonial literature. Magic Realism is a technique that portrays the magical and fantastic elements in an otherwise mundane environment. The term itself in an oxymoron which suggests a binary opposition between the representational codes of 'realism' and 'fantasy' Originated in Latin America, Alejo Carpentier introduced the concept of "lo real maravilloso" to describe the combination of the fantastic and mundane in Latin American fiction in his essay "On the Marvellous Real in Spanish America." Magic Realist writing in English during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has coincided with the rise of Postcolonial Literature with such similar resemblances that Elleke Boehmer observed the two as "almost inextricable" (Bowers 235).

*The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines magic realism as a "kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical elements are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the reliable tone of objective, realistic report" (Baldick 146). Magic Realism as a postcolonial device seeks to look into the concept of 'hybridity'- a characteristic of post colonialism. It attempts to provide liberating responses to colonial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity by translating colonial violence and history into 'codes of recognition' through which the "dispossessed voices" can fight against the "inherited notions of imperial history"(Ashcroft 59-60). Rather than presenting time in a linear fashion, it makes a cyclical appearance constantly shifting back and forth between histories of a pre-colonial past and a post-industrial present. The postcolonial sentiment is well expressed through the magic realism narrative because post colonialism is a history which is constantly relieved in the memory. Homi Bhabha states that magic realism is "the literal language of the emergent post-colonial world" (7). According to Zamora and Faris, "Magic Realism is a mode suited to exploring and transgressing- boundaries, whether these boundaries are ontological, political, geographic or generic" (5-6). Majority of magic realist writing can be described as postcolonial because they are written in a postcolonial discourse that recognizes the impact of colonialism on the context of the novel. Magic Realism challenges the assumption of the political aspect of the authoritative colonial attitude and seeks to disrupt the notion of colonial power. Viewing the closeness of magic realism to post colonialism, Boehmer claims:

Drawing on the special effects of magic realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement... [T]hey combine the supernatural with local legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent societies which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption. Magic effects, therefore, are used to indict the follies of both empire and its aftermath. (Bowers 235)

## II

Magic Realism emerged as a technique that experienced similar political and social predicaments to postcolonial fiction. Magic realism is identified by 'hybridity' - a term originated from biology and found subsequent contemporary usage in popular cultural and post-colonial discourses. Hybridity refers to the "offspring" of two different ideas or the cross between two races or cultures that have been 'mixed up' such as- racial or cultural origin, urban or rural, Eastern and Western. Emerging as a post-colonial discourse, hybridity studies the effect of mixture on identity and culture through the existing binaries. In a magic realist narrative, hybridity occurs through the intermingling of the fantastic and the mundane elements in order to reveal a deeper reality than conventional realist techniques.

Hybridity is a conscious discontinuity that comes from the displacement of the experience of the writer. As a postcolonial and diasporic writer, Sibal herself is a 'displaced' individual who utilizes 'magic realism' to provide a true image of Indian realities of partition, history and politics by fusing elements of 'magic' and 'reality'. *Yatra* depicts 'hybridity' by exploring multiple planes of realities that co-exist across space and time displaying the binaries of the past and present, realistic and magical, western and indigenous or fact and fiction in exploring the event of partition, colonial violence and histories by linking personal identity to the national. Belonging to the third generation of her family, Krishna dwells upon her ancestral history to understand her roots and identity in context of the larger history of India. Krishna, the product of an Indian father and a Greek mother is a 'hybrid' who is in a constant state of confusion regarding her parentage and cultural identity. Problematizing her identity in context to uncertain or multiple parentages is a good example of hybridity. The questions regarding identity and parentage come into the context because of Sonia's liaisons with another Greek man, Michael Starvos. Dispossessed by her mother's love and father's acceptance, she went on a quest to search for her confused parentage of 'fathers' and cultural identity as "Paramjit Chahal's love for his daughter was leaking; soon she would marry and belong to another family. She registered dispossession with a straight thrust, the seed of anguish going into her ground." (Sibal 77)

Postcolonial writers such as Rushdie or Sibal can rewrite histories sensitively through the magic realism technique. Rushdie created a protagonist who is born at the exact moment of midnight when the British left the sub-continent. Salman Rushdie considers magic realism as "the expression of a Third-world consciousness, arising in a world in which the new coexists with the old and in which political, social and economic problems seem more extreme than in the West" (301). Sibal's Krishna Chahal similarly fits into the categorization of Rushdie's 'child of midnight' who is born 'fair-skinned' amidst the colonial violence of the Jalianwala Bagh Massacre through the gift of a 'magical skin' that darkens with the political tumult of Indian history and the incurring events of her life:

Just as Krishna's skin astonished her, darkening with events and loyalties, registering journeys, and connections. Sometimes her skin was like an airline map, criss-crossed with straight lines connecting up distant, unlikely places. For a long time, until she began to act, she had been its simple audience, watching the effect of life upon her skin, how it has responded to the pain of exposure, slowly ripening like a berry, turning from the white of Greek statues to the purple midnight of Indian Gods. (Sibal 75)

Through magic realism, the Indian identity is redefined by forging a point of view specific to the historical and political events of India. The imperial history of colonization, political turbulence and influx of immigrants are rewritten through the inclusion of fantastic events in the larger context of the nation facilitating a link between the personal and the national. The 'hybridity' of magic realism is witnessed in great detail through cyclical time and fragmented history as Krishna revisits the violent colonial histories of Guru-ka-Bagh incident through Satinder's eyes:

Then they marched through the mud and the heat to Guru-ka-Bagh. I was a young boy then, and I watched while the British and their lackeys beat them down brutally. I have never forgotten the silent strength through their faith, the power, the energy and wholeness which their moral vow gave to them. (Sibal 271)

Krishna's man-eating dream of "handling huge gobbets of human flesh" on the train ride to Dagra is another instance of magic realism because she knew her ancestral history without prior knowledge due to her connection to her ancestors through blood. Colours danced on her skin, darkening her, whenever she revisited the multiple realities of colonial past through a 'magical time travel' to the exact point when her ancestor Swaranjit Kaur possessed the salt mine from her British lover by an act of bravery and how she lost the possession to the very salt mine after failing a virginity test conducted by her husband. The portrayal of fantastic element is interwoven in the text when Krishna could feel Satinder's trauma of losing his beloved, Swaranjit's pain on her brother's death who survived a brutal life, death of her parents, travelling from Kohat to Sialkot during partition and her sudden disappearance altogether from her isolated room.

Sibal went into a 'fairytale mode' in indulging the element of hybridity in the character of Chaman Bajaj as an 'evil king' and Bibi Chinti as an 'evil witch'. Bibi Chinti, a woman with large breasts is no less than an evil witch who mysteriously appears at places where trouble lingers. She is the embodiment of evil and the seed of corruption that was present "when Poonam was blown up by a grenade, when Ram Adhikari was shot dead, when Bhim Lal Whig was murdered in Sheetal Square" (Sibal 149). Krishna could sense the evilness and racist prejudice of Chaman who utterly despised her dark skin. A patriarch of his time, he wanted to be recognized on the structures of power and whose insult reacted Krishna's skin the exact moment:

I know lots of women like you . . . who don't know how to look after their husbands or their husband's families, which is the duty of a woman. It's the only thing that makes a woman's life worthwhile. (Sibal 89)

Magic realism allows writers to express a non-dominant perspective from a feminist, postcolonial or any other standpoint. The narratives of colonial power and the dominant culture are subverted through the use of hybridity. Hybridity allows the "creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zones produced by colonization" (Ashcroft et al. 20). Magic realist novels are widely discernable as 'testimonies' of oppressed communities. The comparison of 'patriarchy' with 'colonial power' can be witnessed in postcolonial discourses where the colonized 'nation-state' is often compared to a 'woman' who is not an independent subject. However, the postcolonial 'nation-state' after independence does not retain to the existing stereotypes rather it goes into a phase of metamorphosis concerning gender and sexuality (Naaman 333). Women, in postcolonial discourse attempts to redefine their position and power. Since *Yatra* is a political and a female-centric novel, it aims to subvert the power of patriarchy by

disrupting the existing stereotypes through a postcolonial feminist standpoint. Postcolonial Feminism is a response to colonialism that seeks to understand the imperial histories of colonialism through feminist thought. This form of feminism resists the Euro-American centric forms of oppression by focusing on the diverse forms of oppression women experience in different cultures. Postcolonial feminism seeks to end ramifications of sexism, imperialism or racism in totality. Mohanty critiques the political aspect of Western Feminism and its discursive construction and witnessing of the Third World woman as a victimized stereotype. Mohanty rightfully remarks:

The relationship between 'Woman'—a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.)—and 'women'—real, material subjects of their collective histories—is one of central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. (334)

By not victimizing Krishna as a Third World woman and presenting her as powerfully, Sibal left no stone unturned in asserting the position of the female in a man's world. Krishna is a modern day liberated heroine who fought her way to achieve the position in her life. Betrayed by her husband, she opted to live an independent single woman's life while her rejection by her father, Paramjit pushes her to embrace angwaltha of "Mother India" (Rajan 82). However, she possessed the thriving force to live in the face of adversity and create an environment or space for women like her. In the metanarrative of *Yatra*, Sibal presented the 'magical' by identifying moments of Indian history through Krishna's ancestors, a magical skin that reacts sensitively to historical crises and personal occurrences among others.

The problematic issue with the 'postcolonial female' is that their role in national arena of politics and patriotic projects are not clearly defined (Rajan 82). While the succession of women into positions of power is a rare event in Indian politics. By liberating her heroine, Sibal has empowered women's rise to leadership in the nationalistic and political front. Through political leadership, Sibal helped in developing Krishna's selfhood by forging a relation between the 'nation' and the 'female subject'. The participation of 'nation building' activities can be observed as an influence of women's political movement. Sibal's portrayal of Krishna's leadership in her 'exceptional individuality' is observed as a keen attachment of the nation's politics. Krishna chose her role as a leader when she comes to a realization that the old activists are nearing their end. Only through de-gendering Krishna, Sibal mystifies her role as a leader (Rajan 83). Her transition to leadership takes the form of a "padyatra" (journey on foot) as her emergence into the political world where she participated in the Chipko Movement and metamorphosed as a true leader. Sibal imitated Rushdie in dealing with the individual and larger history of the nation. Rushdie's Saleem Sinai and Sibal's Krishna follow similar markers of destiny and nationhood. Both are exceptionally remarkable protagonist whose birth changes the fate of the nation. These markers are extremely important because they are 'handpicked individuals' of destiny who helped rewrite the history of the nation through magical elements.

### III

Postcolonial literature itself is a hybridized term that is a product of the colonial culture and filled with hybrid elements. The word 'Postcolonial' consists of two binaries- 'Post' meaning 'the aftermath of something' and 'Colonial' meaning 'countries that are colonies'.

Magic Realism shares similar characteristics with post colonialism concerning hybridity and identity. *Yatra* can be observed through the binaries of hybridity of Western and the Eastern, fact and fiction and the personal and the political. *Yatra* situates the experiences of Krishna's hybrid identity through the larger context of the 'nation'. The technique of Magic Realism is used extensively in Sibal's *Yatra* to relate to Krishna's transformative 'magical' skin that darkens to historical and political crises of the nation. Through the fabulation of modern history, Sibal displays the hardcore realities of the Punjab partition, riots and violence, immigration of people by fusing it with the personal events of Krishna's life.

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