



JUXTAPOSING FICTION AND PARA-LITERATURE: MAGIC REALISM IN SUDHIN N. GHOSE'S *THE VERMILLION BOAT*

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Abstract

A prolific but long forgotten writer who is also evidently considered as an important contributor in creation of the genre of Indian Writing in English is Sudhin N. Ghose. The tetralogy of novels for which Ghose remains famous, till date, is an exceptional piece of literary work in the history of Indian Writing in English. No other work of tetralogy of novels apart from Ghose's exists in the history of Indian Writing in English. The tetralogy of novels published sequentially within 1949 to 1955 represent a multitude of themes, situations and concepts.

The predominant theme of magic realism and oral narratives in the tetralogy of novels makes it stand apart. Although all the episodes of the tetralogy deals with the concept of magic realism but the third episode entitled *The Vermillion Boat* is exceptional. With *Manasa Mangal Kavya* as its focal point, *The Vermillion Boat* on one hand narrates the tussle of ego between Chand Sadagar and Manasa Devi, and on the other how Ghose's nameless protagonist is saved due to Manasa Devi's timely interference. As Manasa Devi is represented as the snake goddess, people who are marginalized with sparse resources and are unable to protect themselves from snakes appease Manasa Devi to save their lives. But for the privileged appeasing Manasa Devi is unthinkable. *Manasa Mangal Kavya* is an important text depicting fulfilment Manasa Devi's desire of being worshipped by an upper class devotee - Chand Sadagar. Through this paper I would like to analyse how Ghose juxtaposes the concepts magic realism and paraliterature in creating an intriguing text

Keyword: Indian Writing in English, Magic Realism, Sudhin N Ghose

Introduction

Sudhin N. Ghose is perceived as a significant novelist in the history of Indian Writing in English, though Ghose's works have been less explored but they are considered to be a key contribution in formation of the genre of Indian Writing in English. Ghose's works received numerous acclamations in the West but it failed to acquire a readership in India, which might have been due the fact that

Ghose was settled in London for a long time and his writings were published there. Another dominant reason for which Ghose might have been overlooked was the period in which his works were published. As Ghose published his works of fiction during the period when Indian society was transforming as a result of the Freedom Movement and people were interested in reading literature dealing with political, social, sociological changes and reforms, as well as

religious issues. As Ghose's novels which were published as a tetralogy, was mistakenly perceived as a series of autobiographical memoirs, even till date Ghose's books are preserved in the autobiographical section of National Library, Kolkata and not in the fiction category.

The tetralogy of novels which follows as:

- i) *And Gazelles Leaping*
- ii) *Cradle of the Clouds*
- iii) *The Vermillion Boat*, and
- iv) *The Flame of the Forest*,

These four novels depict situations through which a reader is bound to consider that the writer is the nameless young protagonist. As Ghose deals with rural Bengal and the then Calcutta through the tetralogy, he simply juxtaposes his early life spent in the then Chandernagore (presently Chandannagar) to that of the protagonist's, in a way through various situations the protagonist experiences Ghose recalls his days spent in Bengal.

Ghose's writings present a multitude of themes like cosmopolitanism, religious discrimination, and multi-culturalism and it was an unusual trait for a writer incorporating such issues in his writings in the late 1940's when readers were more interested in reading literature related to social issues. The third volume of the tetralogy which I would be analyzing in this paper is entitled *The Vermillion Boat* which depicts an overall transformation of the protagonist; it starts with his journey from his village to Calcutta for pursuing higher studies and later on it deals with his initiation into adulthood and his sensuous experiences in company of women. This part of the tetralogy effectively establishes bodily transition experienced by the protagonist while crossing over to adulthood from adolescence, and to describe aspect of love and relations established with the opposite sex. Ghose also intricately merges the mythic text *Manasa Mangal Kavya* in the plot to create a new genre of popular fiction.

Magic Realism in Sudhin N. Ghose's Work

To situate Ghose's works the genre of *paraliteratures* reserves to be the best option as his works contain elements of fantasy, mystery, and magic realism. In *The Vermillion Boat* Ghose has presented mystery and myth along with magic realism to the utmost. As Luis Leal has defined Magical realism as, '... more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles in closed or open structures. In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts. The principle thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances. In magical realism key events have no logical or psychological explanation. The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things. (*Magical Realism* 119-123)

The Vermillion Boat is divided in three parts—*Behold the Idols*, *Of Sensuous Fires* and *And Many Waters*. In the first part the protagonist recalls, if a helpless person unknowingly gets into danger, he'll be saved, as providence proves to be the guiding star for the innocent and helpless. The protagonist embarks on his journey to a new territory keeping his faith on the Divine. Even before the protagonist comes into terms with people and environment of a metropolis, he comes across weird situations, but keeping himself alert and keeping faith on the Divine he deftly saves himself and recollects his grandmother's words '*providence protects the helpless*'. The day he steps in Calcutta for the first time a *bandh* was being observed, but the hero finds out his Chinese friend Tu Fan, who was his kindergarten mate and takes refuge in his house. This particular search by the hero to find out his friend Tu Fan remains to be a mystery as Calcutta being a crowded and a vast city, how the hero could trace someone so easily without even having an address. It seems that a Divine intervention helps the protagonist find a shelter so that he is not left all alone to fend himself in an unknown city.

While in Chandernagore, the young boy once while trying to sail his vermilion colored boat had fallen into a tank which was filled with poisonous cotton mouth snakes, but he was saved at the right moment before being bitten by those venomous snakes. It was unknowingly that the hero had set his sail in the tank, and when he realizes that the thin striped creatures were much more than '...funny fish like the *Babin* fish or *Kunchay* – a lamprey or an eel...' (The *Vermillion Boat*,48) it was quite late to gather himself up to safety. The protagonist's family members were off the opinion that they will lose the young boy as it was impossible to steal him from impending attack of venomous snakes, but only his grandmother or '*didi-ma*' muttered, 'providence protects the helpless'. When the young boy mustering all his courage fervently swims in the tank and is fished out of the tank, '...the Padre Sahib of Dupleix College' says '...this child has been the object of divine mercy' (pg.51) and everyone believes that it is the Snake Goddess or Manasa Devi whose divine interference saves the child from fangs of death. With this incident Ghose creates a mysterious circumstance wherein the divine existence meets the mortal.

The second part of the novel - *Of Sensuous Fires*, as the name suggests, is about the hero's initiation into adulthood as well as his understanding about emotional and physical bonding. While living in the hostel the hero experiences loneliness, though his Latin tutor, Roma comes to his rescue but nothing could save him from his nightmares consisting of '...I found myself swimming in the sea, somewhere near the Sagar Island, and the billows were coils of venomous serpents: not moccasins, but gigantic reptiles, scaly and slimy creatures, many feet long, somewhat like enormously elongated huge lizards and basset-hounds. They wanted to entangle me in the convolutions of their sinuous tails, and I made desperate efforts to swim out of their reach, only to drift towards a strange whirlpool, which sucked me in. I woke up with a start and found that I was covered with sweat and panting for breath' (pg.125). When these dreams keep on tormenting the hero for a long time, his friend Tu Fan suggests him to visit '...theshrine of the Snake Goddess, ManasaDevi...' (pg.186) and in the

temple of Manasa Devi, the protagonist meets a female acolyte who guides him in clearing his confusions. While exploring Manasa Devi temple the protagonist is awestruck when he comes across 'mural paintings of Chand Sadagar'. Manasa Devi in order to be recognized as a goddess of significance wishes to be worshipped by a wealthy person. To fulfill her wish Manasa Devi chose Chand Sadagar, but Chand Sadagar, being a *Shaivait* does not give in to Manasa Devi's demands. Being stubborn in not paying his obeisance Chand Sadagar faces the wrath of Manasa Devi by losing his entire business and his family. But later on his fortune was returned to him when he finally worships Manasa Devi.

When the acolyte of Manasa Devi temple speaks about various mysteries of life which can be hardly rationally solved, the hero mentions 'What was the reason that prevented Plutarch from writing about the mysteries he had witnessed I do not know. And I think it is best that the secret of the esoteric rites in the Golden Pagoda should not be revealed to those who are not mentally prepared to receive them', Ghose in this part of the novel has entwined mystery and reality to establish the fact that the hero without hampering the flow of mystery and imagination wanted to be a part of the magic realism which existed around him.

The acolyte also introduces the protagonist to a porpoise kept in a tank at the Manasa Devi temple and mentions '...Porpoises are Manasa's vehicles...'. The porpoise named Sisi-Magar, was supposed to be freed in the River Ganges during the Ganga Sagar Mela and the acolyte asks the protagonist to help her out. The hero readily accepts the offer and plans to be in Ganga Sagar Mela, which was held in a village named Jater Dol. On the auspicious day of the Ganga Sagar Mela, the hero comes to Jater Dol along with his vermilion boat, but he is mesmerized by the scenic beauty of that place and mentions '...As for the perennial nasturtiums of the headland, they rightly deserved the praise of my patroness Sarojini Naidu:

Poignant and subtle and bitter perfume

Exquisite, luminous, passionate bloom,

Your leaves interwoven of fragrance and fire
Are Savitri's sorrow and Sita's desire,
Draupadi's longing, Damayanti's fears
And sweetest Sakuntala's magical tears.'
(pg.259)

Keeping this cheerful mood intact the protagonist immerses himself in the festivities which would follow Sisi-Magar's release into the sea. Though the protagonist is warned not to venture far into the sea in his amateurish boat, but after the release of Sisi-Magar in the sea, he feels that he has lost a close friend and while contemplating about his existence in this world he ventures far into the deep sea. The protagonist faces strong sea storm due to which his boat falls into pieces and unable to fight with the strong sea waves he becomes unconscious. Everybody on the shore begins a frantic search for the protagonist, but it is Sisi-Magar who carries the protagonist on her back to the shore. Everyone breaks into a joyous celebration when the protagonist is carried to the shore by Sisi-Magar and it is profoundly established that as the protagonist was trying to help the porpoise who is supposed to be 'Manasa's vehicle', thus when the protagonist was in deep trouble it was Manasa Devi who sent the porpoise to save him.

Conclusion

Sudhin N. Ghose in his works have combined such instances wherein divine and common have been laid on a common platform which creates not only a quirky situation but it also makes the readers feel that these incidents are a part of their existence too. But Ghose's works are not only about magic realism or mysteriousness, it also generously mentions the rustic beauty found in the Indian villages which is evident when he quotes Sarojini Naidu in his novel. Though Ghose could not attain his due respect as an eminent writer and contributor in the genre of Indian Writing in English, but I think if his works are rightly analyzed and read it will introduce us with innumerable mystic, mythic and contemporary issues.

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