

TRENDS, TEXTS AND CONTEXTS : INTERPLAY OF HISTORY, MYTH AND MAGIC IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN WRITING

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There is no denying that contemporary writing in India as well as in Latin America has been generated by post-colonial societies in the latter half of the 20th century looking at themselves in woe, bewilderment and wisdom born of hindsight. Apart from their hard-earned self-perception, the Indian postcolonial writers— writing most, though not solely, in English— also share with their South American counterparts like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende, what Elleke Boehmer has aptly termed as “a view from the fringe of dominant European cultures and an interest in the syncretism produced by colonization” (1994-235).

Interestingly, their colonial past and its outcome are not the only communalities that these two vast lands and their peoples share. There are several other aspects upon which these two cultures and their literatures converge. K. Satchitanandan (2006) perceptively describes the basis for this convergence as :

...a creative mixture of cultures and races of different origins that give our countries their beautiful diversity, range and depth that can come only from such a variegated millieu... [the] memories of deprivation, oppression and disgrace combined with an aspiration for freedom, equality and dignity that have become part of our national psyche. And our struggles for liberation from agonizing regimes from within and abroad have deeply impacted our literatures, making them restless and disturbing, in their state of despair as well as of hope. (1-2).

No doubt, the parallel pasts of these countries— complex,

convoluted and compelling— are always peering over the shoulder of their respective presents. At the same time, all their contemporary writing cannot be clubbed together as a monolith of sorts. Moreover, contemporary writing is the literary expression of writers who belong to two generations: one, that has come of age in the shadow of the colonial experience and its myriad compulsions, but has continued to write into freedom; the other, which has been nurtured on the multiple contradictions of the post-colonial realities but which has also inherited the complex legacy of the colonial past.

Moreover, these writers of the succeeding generation in particular have been heirs to other complications specific to their times in that :

“[t]he late twentieth century has witnessed demographic shifts on an unprecedented scale, impelled by many different forces : anti-imperialist conflict, the claims of rival nationalisms, economic hardships, state repression” (Boehmer, 232), but also, the awesome advent of globalization with information technology, trade and travel in two, an unprecedented ideological flux, and of course, international terrorism. Further, these contemporary writers have not only a common past but ‘a new shared context of marginalization, exploitation and resistance to hegemonies within our countries and the larger imperialist one in the unipolar world of today’ (Satchidanandan, 2).

In the case of the present—day writers, oscillating “[f] from national bonding to international wanderings, from rootedness to peregrination” (Boehmer, 232), such wide-ranging experiences appear to have got inter-linked and fused into an integrated world-view. While early post-independence writers tended to identify with nationalist causes and to endorse the need for communal solidarity, it is not surprising that in the 1980s and early 1990s many writers’ geographic and cultural affiliations have become have divided and uncertain.

There is probably a reason for this difference in view point and approach: the first generation of writers, particularly in India, had

evolved its own tentative vision of the future freedom wherein self-assurance would rub shoulder with self-critique with a modicum of hope for change; for the writes of the following generation, it has been sadly, more of disillusionment caused by a stark lived reality albeit tempered with a faith in counter-ideology and subversion. Notwithstanding this difference, the contemporary fiction writer has been substantially influenced by his fore-runners' essentially humanistic, accommodative view of the world, although his own view is marked by the deep concern that the margins melt and the so-called subaltern he expectedly reinstated to appropriate position of power within the orthodox hierarchy, by replacing the conservative, dominant force of radical centrist ideology.

Yet, it is difficult to thus categorize writers in terms of generations representing 'a particular kind' of vision. An interesting example spanning both the generations, to be cited in this context is of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's Malayalam short story 'Anal Haq' written in 1940 but published in 1982. [See, *Wind Flowers : Contemporary Malayalam Short Stories*. Eds. Abdulla and Asher (2004) for English translation]. Deviating from the bulk of the prevalent 'realistic fiction' of his day, Basheer chose to tread what Raveedran describes as 'path as leading in terms of sensibility to the Latin American labyrinth... 'Anal Haq' at least in part would read like the story of a Marquez.'" (2006, 4).

The story deals with a West Asian mystic of medieval period who disenchanted by his arduous encounters with false ideologues and prophets, proclaims his own doctrine of 'anal haq' (I am the Truth), has to pay with his life for his putatively blasphemous defiance. Significantly, the author adds an interesting footnote to the story. "I wrote this forty years ago. We are now in 1982. I believe it is presumptuous for any man, who is only one of God's creations to say '*anal haq*' or '*aham brahmasmi*'. The story of Mansur is not based on historical fact. The whole thing can be treated as mere fantasy : Anal Haq.' (Abdulla and Asher, 2004, 18).

Based on a legend and cocooned in fantasy, it is tale, which according to the narrator inspires 'terrifying fear'. However, in

Raveendran view, this fear is palpable within a much wider context and is applicable to a far larger extent as :

This is true not merely of the story, but of history as well in as much as colonial Kerala striving hard in the early decades of the twentieth century to strengthen the fledgling spirit of democracy, was also waging a series of popular struggles against economic, social, political, caste and gender oppressions involving the various segments of society...(4)

Interestingly, in wondering whether, 'Anal Haq' is a fantasy that annuls its own history, or is it a work of history that annuls its own fantasy, Raveendran discovers that "this conundrum is also seen animating contemporary Latin American fiction", while he does not find many contemporaries of Basheer stepping out side the formal confines of modernist fiction in Malayalam.

This state of affairs can be also observed in the large quantum of Indian literature of Basheer's generation, whether in English or in Bhasha literatures, Barring few notable exceptions such as Girish Karnad, Balachandra Nemade or A. R. Ananthmurthy, the tendency of many a writer of the modernist era— not withstanding their formal experimentation and concern with univiersal identities. As against this, the bold stance of Latin American writing of the Boom years striving to focus on fundamentally native issues and local concerns even as they experimented with stunning combinations of the real and imaginary, stand out. Carlos Fuentes' *The Death of Artemir Cruz* (1963) and Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch* (1963) are but two instances from a large bulk of committed writing.

Notably, the present generation of writers in India takes a critical view of totalizing ideologies and universal values often ignoring or despairing of them entirely. These writers no longer believe in suggestively or adroitly questioning the absence of essential values in practice, or in suavely exploring the possibilities of integrating but pluralistic ideologies. Rather, they bluntly expose the multiple dimensions of marginality, and firmly project subversion and counter-ideology as the means of repositioning otherness.

The concerns dominating contemporary fiction per se, therefore,

are essentially post-structuralist as also post-modernist. These, in turn, get infused with the thematic fiber of this writing and become visible within the contextual lining of the texts as well. With such heavy demands on their creativity, the contemporary fiction writer's styles and techniques have undergone a hitherto unforeseen metamorphosis, and their strategies of articulation have become resourcefully improvised.

Co-incidentally, the wave of innovation and experimentation with narrative form as well as content unleashed by Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred years of Solitude* (1963) has been a trailblazer and a trend-setter. Although, he is not the first to unfold in fiction the magical elements in Latin American ethos, he has certainly brought fantasy into the mainstream of world literature, and driven home the view and reality is not restricted to the banalities of day to day living.

Gopi Chand Narang (2006) finds an element of affinity in terms of their manifest 'traits' between Latin American magic realism and the Dastan, Aiyari and Quissa literature in India not to mention other fictional work including popular Bollywood productions. Under-scoring the salience of magic realism for its portrayal of 'the real world mingling with a world of fantasy created by the author, breaking down the boundaries between the real and the unreal, in which the final denouement is ambiguous or unexpected' Narang commends this mode of Latin American writing for its depiction of the 'melieu' through the portrayal of the harsh social reality and misery borne by the masses.

It must be said here that since Rushdie's first foray to absorb and emulate this source influence, a wide spectrum of Indian fiction displays lesser or greater resemblance to Latin American magic realism, sometimes intentionally but in some cases also unconsciously adopting/adapting its narrative modes and features in accordance with authorial motives or fictional requirement. While Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* represents the fore-ground of this wide-ranging spectrum of magic realism in Indian fiction in English, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* and Arundhati

Roy's *God of Small Things* being up its rear.

It is useful to remember at this juncture that 'magic realism' implies such modern fictional work in which the fabulous and the fantastic operate in a narrative which otherwise upholds an authentic and / or reliable mode of objective and realistic narration. In this sense it can be seen in Amitava Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*. This fiction-infused travel narrative and strong historical moorings reconstitutes the relationship between a prosperous tunisian Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yuji and his Indian slave-cum-agent Bomma through the accidentally discovered correspondence between Ben Yuji and Khalaf Ibn Ishaq from Egypt. But it also tells of modern Egypt in the throes of change and of the protagonist's predicament in another 'Third World' country which has missed out on the quick strides towards progress that India has made.

Interestingly, Ghosh weaves into his narrative not only the medieval legend of the dove perched atop the Amir's tent until he returns from battle to found a city there, and the Sufi parable of the shadow of the heavenly Humma bird that apparently inspired Muhammad Ghazni to be the *slave of his slave*, but also of the *Geriza documents* and the outcome of handing over these historical documents to the State and the misadventure of the own vist to the *mowlid* of Side Abu Kanaka due to the suspicion of Security personnel for fear of espoinage.

It can be seen that more than being a fiction about a medieval relationship, or a historical travel account, Ghosh's narrative is a historiographical project of narrativizing the life of a liminal merchant, who is the personificatin of the Indian Ocean Trade that confounds the East-West bifurcation of Orientalist cartographies. (Thiene John, 2003) Such multivalent generic transmutaion is a reminder that the generic postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveller or an 'extra-territorial', that a national. Ex-colonial by birth, 'Third World' in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, he or she also works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or politcial connections with the national background (ibid.)

This holds true of much Latin American writing as well.

Thus, it would be interesting to see how the 'generic' Latin American writer fares in this context. Jaime Collyer has an insightfully captivating observation to make. Semi-seriously referring to the compulsive combination of accident, belief, conjecture and make-belief that resulted in the actual discovery of 'the continent' and subsequently in the fantasy-mingled documentation of that marvelous *moment*, he pithily points out,

[From then on, Latin American has always been placed at an unreal distance from the rest of the world, acquiring citizenship only insofar as it is described, or people write about it, in a fantasy-oriented, self interested way...from this moment onward, the pre-Colombian, European and *mestizo* who makes up the new Latin American live their own history as a sum of deliberate fictions, as chronicles of experiences that are half truth and half speculation....Europeans and natives both activate their own myths and fictions, in the wake of the brutal encounters, creating the inescapable synthesis from which springs, at that vary moment, the narratives of the continent that later merge, in our times, into the syncretic paradigm of Magic Realism.

Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier's query: "what is the history of Latin America if not a tale of the wonder in daily life?", aptly endorses Colleyer's view that, "[M]yth defines and sustains it and has granted it with life and a *raison d'être*... [B]ecause....reality always yearns to yield, however secretly, to the imagination."

Little wonder, then, that much of critically compelling contemporary fiction— Latin American as also Indian- purports to be the imaginative (but also imaginary) re-construct of recorded events and phenomena, while the historical strain within the narrative acts as the support-system for fiction and fantasy granted into the web of the resultant micro-narratives. These often lay siege to what Rosemary Jackson calls the 'bourgeois category of the real' (1981, 26), and subvert the questionable findings of meta-history and re-examine its contested premises.

Thus, while history often functions as an ally of the

contemporary writer at times, it is also his/her most formidable foe which can neither be escaped nor exorcised. Ironically, the contemporary writer would not seriously want to be rid of this *ingrained* antagonist for it is history that gives him his bearings, by contextualizing him within his native ethos and thereby provides him with an identity of sorts which is necessary to navigate within the globalised world and negotiate its pluralistic demands/compulsions.

Argentinian writer, Julio Cortesar's emblematic short story "House Taken Over" (1951) obliquely hints at this paradox of history's hold over individuals, and, the accompanying nostalgia and dependency syndrome through the palpable symbolism of his huge ancestral mansion.

The celebrated idea of solitude and the invaluable worth of silence that marks Marquez' novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Joao Guimaraes Resa's short story the "*Third Bank of the River*" as well, as much other Latin American fiction, gets deftly underscored in Cortesar's protagonist who finds it a 'pleasure' to take lunch and 'commune with the great, hollow, silent house.'

At the end of the story, in a flash of magic realism, the reader 'sees' that the 'house' is not just a house. It is a mythic emblem, a historical site, as well as a psychological prop—all at once! The protagonist and his sister Irene discover that their side on this side of the massive oak door is also taken over (as the other has been) and run frantically out into the vestibule, shut the grating leading to the hall and the house and leave. Dumbstruck the reader watches them as they go "*into the streets*", lock the front door uptight and toss the key down the sewer because "*It wouldn't do to have some poor devil decide to go in and rob the house, at that hour and with the house taken over.*"

Interestingly, if such is the hold of history on the Latin American sensibility, in the case of India it manifests itself as a thematic preoccupation with the memory of 'partition' reflecting the split psyche of the nation but also the schizophrenia of the individual mind. In fact, whether Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Amrita

Pritam's *Pinjar* or Khushwant Singh's *Train To Pakistan*, each is a creative attempt to exorcise this haunting historical memory — sometimes through the fantasmagoria of magic realism and sometimes through unembellished idealism and at times through crude sarcasm and bland realism.

A similar need for healing the schism of the past can be seen in select Goan fiction writers Carmo D'Souza ('Angela's Goan Identity') and Lambert Mascarenhas ('Sorrowing Lies My Land'). Likewise, Mahabaleshwar Sail's Konkani historical novel *Yug Sanwaar* is set in the 16th century. It dwells on the history of the old conquests of Goa, the compulsive conversions to Catholicism, the inhuman Inquisition clamped upon by the hapless populace, the persecution of the neo-converts and the forced exodus of the natives—both converts and non-converts—into linguistic/political wilderness across far and near regions in search of asylum. Sail has unraveled with great sensitivity and understanding, the scar of history and the schism caused by geography to the Konkani psyche. He has made use of a generous smattering of myths, legends, native rites and rituals (seen by the agents of the Church as sorcery or witch craft', indigenous modes of worshipping local deities, superstitious beliefs in medieval Goa, all find a place in Sail's well researched historical fiction. In this sense, such novels become an unwitting illustration of what Maggie Humm (1994) has termed as the use of multiple forms of narratives including history, myth, and fables with quasi-journalistic accounts, which epitomize the struggle for self expression which is paramount in any colonial or post-colonial context (1994).

Understandably, such complex multi-modal experimentation with fact and fantasy daringly woven into autobiographical fiction is even more starkly visible in the writings of Indian women—traditionally, the most-repressed community among colonial as well as postcolonial societies - across languages such as *Things*, Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines*, Sara Joseph's *Alahayutte Penmakkall* (*Daughters of Alahaa*), Maitreyee Pushpa's *Kasturi Kundal Basaii*, Prabha Khetan's *Chchinnmastaa* to name but a few writers.

Interestingly, in these narratives, the mother-daughter relationship is presented in an idiom or trope that can be better understood in the context of the timeless Demeter-Persephone myth.

For these women writers interlacing history-fiction with fantasy, another multivalent resource is mythology. If history functions as a basis for thematic, contextual and temporal reality, myth helps provide new hermeneutic insight into the narrative. Thus Sara Joseph's deft use of the myth of Noah's Arc and 150 implications of destitution, deprivation and marginalization in the novel *Daughters of Alahaa*. It reaches a heightened level of fatality with the final erasure of the imaginary Kochinara set within the historical frame of contemporary Indian and the idealistic but failed vision of Gandhian ideology.

If Meena Alexander's ambivalent memories *Fault Lines*, speak of the well of innumerable eyes of women haunting her thought, her grandmother Kunju is the historiographic prop that sustains her narrative's historic authenticity against such a fantastic illusion. The grandmother is the most influential personality on the author's life in her defiance of the tradition in the 19th century by refusing an arranged marriage and marrying the man of her choice. She is associated with the freedom-struggle and becomes the first female member of the Travancore Legislative Assembly. In fine, Kunju lends credibility and force to Meena Alexander's own effort to search for her own identity and to find meaning in her dislocated existence.

God of Small Things and *Kastuir Kundal Basaii* are the fictionalized auto-narratives of Arundhati Roy and Maitreyee Pushpa respectively, covering the saga of three generations of females from the British Raj to contemporary India. *Chchinnmastaa* is Prabha Khetan's autobiographical fiction which depicts the vulnerability of females even in apparently protected – and contemporary, elite- environments. These narratives reveal the socio-historical context of their time with a minuteness of detail which is significant. These works uncover the 'constant reality' of unspeakable woes of Indian women from underprivileged as well as elite sections of society,

through the colonial as also the post-colonial era.

They are the symbolic micro-histories of womanhood in communities that are under wrap, and unfold the multiple layers of oppression— hideous sexual exploitation, unmitigated marginality, and the constant threat of erasure/jeopardy-faced by women in vulnerable social contacts/contexts but also within the so-called secure precincts of family. They defy the ideological myths perpetuated by patriarchy and provide role models and critical paradigms to the suppressed and exploited women in our society. In a way, they question the societal structures and ideological systems that govern the agency of inter-gender dynamics within the hierarchies of culture.

Together these writers create:

a distressful but formidable cacophony of repudiation and resistance that is a metaphor for the oppositional voice of the female across the socio-economic divide within the cultural web of our society, and bring out the possibility of a different genealogy of women's history. They thus assist in the transformation of their ethos and widen the choices available to women in similar position in their cultures, choices that would have perhaps been otherwise unthinkable in the given cultural situation. (Kishori Nayak, 2003).

Finally, a peculiar feature detected in the contemporary fiction must be mentioned in this discussion. Whether in Latin American or in Indian fiction, it is not uncommon that pitched against unequal and often insurmountable challenges of exploitation and violence, the vulnerable individual is seen to revert to cocoon of socio-emotional security in an intimate blood-relationship often with incestuous implications. For instance, Rahel and Esthapa in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*, or the protagonist and his sister Irene in Julio Cortazar's *House Taken Over*, or even, Aureliano and Amaranta Ursula in Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to mention but a significant few.

They are probably attempts to demonstrate the mythic undertones of the imminent annihilation of a family or a lineage. As is indicated in Melquiades' verse in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*:

"the first of the line is tied to a tree...and the last of the line is being eaten by the ants." This verse reverberates in the reader's mind like a prophetic chant of Fate and signals as Prafulla Kumar Mohanty aptly observes:

that there is a larger world beyond literature to which man must wake up. Both Latin American and Indian fiction, for that matter, the whole range of literature everywhere posit man in the fivesensory world of suffering. But suffering is as endless as life. And myths guide us to transcend suffering by a multisensory response in the fields of time and space (2006, 9).

That may be why, the contemporary writer often functions as a deft myth-maker sometimes fashioning new myths and sometimes providing the reader with a extant mythic lens through which to understand and perceive his society and the world within the seamless expanse of time, space and imagination.

In examining random texts of contemporary fiction in Latin America and India, it is possible to detect parallel trends and overlapping concerns in them. No doubt, history and myth are widely used but even fantasy is never far out of the author's reckoning. For instance, the setting for the narrative invented by the authors is a clue leaving no doubt about its imaginary location and identity. A good example is Sara Joseph's creation of the imaginary village of Kochinara, in the vicinity of Trishoor, Pramod Tiwarae's imaginary Khelasarai (Literally, play-caravan serai) in *Dar Hamari Jebon Mein* which we are told in the blurb is everywhere and that it is our republic. They are reminiscent of Macondo, the new-found world of imagination that vivifies Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, while it reeks and smells of lived reality.

In conclusion, it can be maintained that, a wide variety of ways pf employing history, myth and magic are discernible in contemporary fiction. However, the strategic uses to which they have been intended are more significant. No doubt, we witness across the cross-section of contemporary fiction a free mingling of fantasy with fact, imagination with belief and romance with reality. This is

evidence enough that, the traditional precincts of realism as well as the experimental confines of modernism are no longer adequate to accommodate the awesome paradoxes and pressures of *lived* history while still clutching on to the string of objectivity and yet provide a glimpse of reality — palpable, if fitting.

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