

Magic Realism in Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*

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Abstract

*Rani Manicka, contemporary Malaysian literary personae who received commonwealth writers' prize in 2003 for her very first fictional work *The Rice Mother*, which has been translated into twenty-two languages, and gained international acclaim. Being vivid storyteller, she explores eastern exoticism in almost all her works, blended with Malaysian literary taste. Her writing is a fusion of unyielding severe subjects like poverty, drunkenness, violence, child-marriage, drug-abuse, loneliness, exploitation and prostitution along with warm family life. She can be rightly called a premier of those writers from Malaysia who exploits novel techniques and peculiar style in writings in English. 'Magic realism' is a term, first came into use to describe the work of certain Latin American writers, later for a small number of writers from many places in the world, now it had a specific meaning that made it useful for critics to describe a group of fictions, having same characteristics alike plentitude, hybridity, metafiction, sense of mystery, mythological allusions, history, superstitions, appearance of ghost and socio-political critique.*

Keywords: Magic Realism, culture, ghost, history, mystery, etc.

This research article is an attempt to analyze Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*, in the light of the term Magic Realism concisely. The select work is a compulsive and often harrowing tale which unfolds over four generations in its plot, so it rightly can be described as a multi-generational or cross generational art of work. But one should not be mistaken it as a familial history, merely family saga because it transports us more than engrossing family epic. It is succulent and mysterious work, interweaving traditional folklore, mythical allusions and studded with an array of evocative motifs, sense of mystery, superstitions and socio-political glimpse of south-east orient world during world war 1st to the threshold of globalization. The nightmare of world war 2nd and the Japanese occupation of Malaysia have been put forth at center of narration.

The term Magic Realism was coined for painterly style by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 his book *Nach Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Problem Der Neuesten Malerei*. Roh believed that magic realism is a distinctive art of expression than surrealism. In fact the term magic realism is an uncanny form of fiction to describe because in literature, magic realist art does not often include overtly fantastic or magical content, but rather looks mundane; the everyday, through hyper realistic and often mysterious lens. While the term magical realism in its modern sense first appeared for a kind fiction in 1955, so in modern and post-modern fiction magical realism became one of the recent forms of novel. It is often compared with surrealism but in true sense it is purely itched realism. No doubt it is distinctly different than fantasy and science fiction. J.A.Cuddon describes magic realism, in his *Dictionary of literary terms and literary theories* as (487)

..... *Features of this kind of fiction are the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic elements, skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, Use of dreams, myth and fairy stories etc...*

The extent characteristics can be applied to a given magic realist text varies. Every text is different and employs different qualities like the fantastic is anything that deviates the rules of real world, ghosts, magic, talking animals, etc. The mundane is the opposite of the fantastic; and it totally heightens the sense of realism about domestic and social activities. Hybridity is basically about mixing heterogeneous ideas together and in the case of Magic Realism, what we're talking about is the way these writers intermix reality with fantasy, fact with fiction, the mundane with the extraordinary. Magic Realist writers explore some bizarre things in the narration with the help of time. In Magic Realist literature, time may be circular instead of linear, or it jumps around and go back and forth from past to future, sometimes it is like zigzag patterned or it stays permanently still. Anything can happen in Magic Realist time, characters live for centuries and more, they die and come again in events, it does not mean that they use what we strictly called linguistically, flashback and flash-forward techniques. Time in magic realist text is somehow acts like any character. Myths are ancient stories handed over from a generation to the next, in orally and in written forms they comprise of supernatural beings like gods, ghosts, spirits what you name it. Magic Realist writers often tend to myths for motivational creative motif and make use of the fantastic elements of myths in their own works. Magic Realism is not always all about ghosts and spirits but it is about contemporary historical happenings and socio- political critique too. Metafiction, sense of mystery, superstitions, etc. these are also least characteristics of Magic Realism

The protagonists of *The Rice Mother* are three women from three different generations, Lakshmi, the matriarch, Dimple, the grand-daughter, and Nisha, the great grand-daughter who is true heir of the family's dynasty. Lakshmi, Dimple and Nisha each face life trials from their own generations through Japanese occupation, past violence, drug abuses, marriages, births, losses and family secrets. The story begins at Ceylon where the marriage of Lakshmi is arranged with Ayah who apparently owns a 'rich' business in the land of Malaya. At the tender age of fourteen, she dealt with this painful truth while separated from beloved mother and attempts to raise her five children in the new land, however she did her job best at her level. She could not forget the mango trees of Ceylon and her childhood that she spent with her all vigor; she becomes homesick and nostalgic for her land and her past memories. In such dilemma she turns from naughty girl to very serious lady, and she concentrates on her children's dreams success. One of the recent features of magic realism is, in plot, character lives in his/her long span of life, so in three generations Lakshmi lives with her own manifestations, in fact she dies natural death but she keeps her alive, as Dimple recorded story of her family tree on her tape recorder. Nisha, the great granddaughter of Lakshmi used to play that recording many times in a plot and she feels like her great grandma is alive and with her. Lakshmi's character is stronger than her husband Ayah who is elder than her and weak on all level, being an expatriate Tamil, working as a local clerk for low salary, living in Malaysia and hardly makes both ends meet. Lakshmi resolves to improve her financial situation. Lakshmi and Ayah live in small wooden house which has got three rooms and located in a residential area which has been developed by foreigners, like Shrilankan and Chinese people. After 1st world war many Chinese traveled to south-east countries to settle themselves.

These all people live together keeping their own identity and maintaining very own cultural activities and traditions. Lakshmi has in quick succession given birth to six children. It is only her sheer force of will that keeps her family together. A crucial yet a colourful period of the Malaysian history, the author has chosen a very appealing setting in which she exploited to her advantage. It is most interesting to note that this story is presented from the first point of narrative view, where the story is told from each characters own point of view in the form of memories.

During the world war 2nd, Mohini, Lakshmi and Ayah's stunningly beautiful daughter is raped and probably murdered by the occupying Japanese troops. Mohini was a beautiful girl. So Lakshmi hid her beneath the floorboards of their house for much of the war. One day Japanese soldiers entered in Lakshmi's house, Lakshmanan, Mohini's twin brother - slipped and fell, accidentally exposing Mohini's hiding place Mohini was taken away by the soldiers and was never seen again. This incident becomes a mystery for characters from novel and

even for readers, we have not been told till the end of narration what happened with Mohini. This sense of mystery is one of the backdrops of Magic Realistic technique. Mohini's disappearance disturbs all family members. Lakshmanan blames himself for Mohini's death and believes that his mother does as well. Son-mother relationship never recovers. Lakshmi is hunted by Mohini's sufferings. We are not informed in detail that what was happened with Mohini, was she raped? Or was she still alive? thus the sense of mystery plays the role of holding interest in plot and further happenings. Lakshmi, in one of the extremely sad dialogues says(227)...

'They will bring her back', she is not dead, Japanese dogs will bring her back.

But she has not been brought back, and the ghost of Mohini appears in Lakshmi's home (or in her own) as Lakshmanan was psychologically disturbed and Lakshmi too fell in the valley of despair, this was the situation of not healing after a tragic shock. According to Bruce Holland Rogers,

"If there is a ghost in a story of magical realism, the ghost is not a fantasy element but a manifestation of the reality of people who believe in and have 'real' experience of ghost. Magical realist fiction depicts the real world of people whose reality is different from ours".

A mirror image of Mohini is Dimple, a daughter of Lakshmanan, who came to Lakshmi's home. After her birth, a source of happiness arrives. Lakshmi recovers from the nightmare of Mohini's murder and rape. Consequently, Dimple is coddled by her grandmother.

If we consider, *One Hundred Years of solitude'*, a popular art of work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez , as far as the magic realist's time is concernd, reader sense from the first page which begins with a firing squad and then a very long flash back, time does not always march forward in the magical realist world view. The distant past is present in every moment, and future has already happened.

Great shifts in the narrative time sequence reflect a reality that is almost outside of time. This account for ghosts, for the feeling that time is a great repetition rather than progression. In Garcia Marquez's novel, certain events keep returning in the present even as time does gradually wind through generations. One can say, we can have some prospective effects by which magical realism conveys this distinctive world-views, and those effects relate to the ways in which this world-views are different from the objective views. In other realities, time

is not linear, causality is subjective, and the magical and the ordinary are one and the same. According to Bruce Holland Rogers,

....As for causality, the objective view tells us that one person's emotion can't kill someone else. We believe this so strongly that a world view in which emotion can kill won't convince us---we'll write it off as fantasy. So magical realist works put causally connected events side by side in a way that doesn't appear to violate objective reality, but attempts to convince us by details that the events described are linked by more than chance...

In a case of *'The Rice Mother'* by Rani Manicka, she did not employ the flashback or flash-forward technique but certain incidents happen in linear motion. Dimple, a girl with breathtaking beauty, takes an extraordinary interest in the family history and goes around recording the stories as told by each member of the extended family. She meets her tragic end, but these stories are eventually discovered by her daughter Nisha, who is great granddaughter to Lakshmi. So, Nisha is informed about her true legacy through the tape recorder, but we all are already familiar with each incident but again plot plays linear running motion game which is very fit characteristics of magic realism.

The present work *'The Rice Mother'* is a treasure of mythical elements and there are many mythical allusions drawn by the writer in a main stream of a plot, moreover they are playing the infinite roles in narration. Hindu Mythologies and native Malaysian superstitions, black magic tricks, usual appearance of snake charmer, the belief of dreadful effect of horoscope and almanac, etc. Magic Realist intentionally incorporates myth into their work is one form of political critique, because Political structures are temporary, but myths have survived for centuries, and they have helped form collective identities stronger than political categories and affiliations in the concerning world. Magical realism can be used to explore the realities of characters or communities who are outside of the objective mainstream of our culture. In a real sense, undeniably they are part of the same culture and civilizations but their reality is a different reality from the world which we can say eccentrically experienced generally and with a specific cultural atmosphere particularly and it's not just South Americans, Indians, Africans or any others from part of the rest of world, who may offer these alternative views. Religious believers for whom the supernatural world is always present and miracles are right around the corner, believers to whom angels really do appear and to whom God reveals themselves directly.

Lakshmi declares in one of the mornings, she had dream where she met an elephant God who talked about the future of her children. When, Mohini had an accident she was taken to village black magician, where she tricked many occult ceremonies, we are reported that all as a routine activity. Rani Manicka, referred the well known myth of Lord Shiva and goddess Parvati, in which how Parvati had won the heart of Lord Shiva, with her unceasing years of sincere devotion and penance in arranging plot of the story. Blending human realities with mythological stories, mostly chosen from religious domain is a typical cult practiced by magic realist and this is applicable for present work also.

Lakshmi, Dimple and Nisha each face life trials from their own generations through the Japanese occupation. As Dimple writes in her last letter to her husband Luke, imploring him to hand over her family's story to Nisha when she reaches at her adulthood. So it is Nisha, who finally comes to term with sorrowful legacy of her ancestors, a legacy of the tough life in new land, of war and death, of unhappiness and unfulfilled dreams. Yet, it is this legacy that enables Nisha to come to terms with her own depression and amnesia and understand her world. The Japanese occupation and Japanese soldier's violence is a backdrop of the tragic journey of Lakshmi's family. The contemporary political storm threw away many sweet homes into burning rivers of power and politics that makes us melancholic and unhappy.

Conclusion:

Human history has a history of dual impulsive force that led us positive and negative outcomes, therefore the Japanese invasion of Malaysia ruins Lakshmi's family emotionally, socially and financially. Lakshmi lost her beloved daughter - a tragedy from which the family never recovers. Thus the dogmatic dominance of contemporary world and power politics of Socio-political milieu played the monster's role in destructing the innocent and beautiful world of people who possess beautiful minds. The family bears deep scars and inflicts those wounds on the next generation.

The Rice Mother is a strong and powerful work by contemporary Malaysian writer who put on the magic realistic form in South Asian English literature, probably, as an earliest, that takes us into the lives of Malaysian people of last century, especially in their culture, customs, myth and folklore etc. Here is the first work of an author where the realism is presented magically and magical things as they are real.

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