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A study of magic realism in ‘the conch bearer’

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is considered to be one of the most famous Indian-American novelist of the contemporary period. Her artistic beauty stands on her art of story telling. Her narrative techniques stand her separate from other novelists. She has employed many techniques in her novels but the best among them are myth and magical realism. The present research paper in an effort to highlight magic realism as an art of narrative with special reference to her novel ‘The Conch Bearer’. The novel is based on an adventurous journey of a impoverished boy Anand, a headstrong but resourceful street girl Nisha, and a mysterious, indeterminate age and with surprise resourceful man named, Abhaydatta. The old man was on his mission to send the conch to the Brotherhood of Silver Valley. He took help of these two children in fulfilling his mission. The mysterious journey was full of dangers and surprises finally ends when the conch was placed at its actual position.

Keywords: Magic realism, narratives, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, magical quality, brotherhood

Introduction

The term magic realism etymological means ‘Surrealism’, ‘Virtual Reality’, or ‘Hyper Reality’. The magical realism is commonly utilized in the novels wherever it is required and does not appear to be whimsical. This is the narrative technique that tries to demonstrate fantastic into reality. The additional definition of reality means, the combination of guidelines, logical and extraordinary. Magic realism combined the reality with fantasy, magic and uncommon expertise in experiences or nature. The European novelists generally avoided magic or magical realism. They believed that magics are not general, they are generated from a specific religious or cultural context. It is believed that the term ‘Magic Realism’ was first coined by German art critic Franz Roh to depict the style of painting in 1925. Angel Flores declared the Argentinean novelist Jorge Luis Borges. as the father of ‘Magic Realism’. Magic realism is very closed to the Indian tradition of story telling. According to Oxford English Dictionary-

“A literary or artistic genre in which realistic narrative and naturalistic technique are combined with surreal elements of dream and fantasy”

Many artistic genius have given the definition of magic realism in many ways. In the words of Brenda Cooper-

“Magical realism attempts to capture reality by way of a depiction of life’s many dimensions, seen or unseen, visible or invisible. Rational and mysterious. In the process, such writers walk a political tight-rope between capturing this reality and providing precisely the exotic escape from reality desired by some of their Western readership”

In addition to the definition of magic realism, there are some importance as well in favour of including magic realism in the literary fictions. As the magic realism is an ornament in the technique of story telling, it also add some flavour to the taste to a fictional work. In the words of Ruth Noriega Sanchez:-

“Magic realism can fill the holes by recovering the pieces of voices and images of overlooked and subsumed chronicles of the other from the perspective of colonized. All these make magic realism an extremely solid post-colonial account gadget in fiction”

Magic realism in conch bearer

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s most attractive resource is her narrative style. She has natural talent and inborn quality of mixing reality with her creative energy. The mixing of the present and the past, fantasy and belief is a unique blend of her writing.

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Divakaruni has set a milestone as a novelist, short story writer, teacher and social activist among main twentieth century writers who have a reputed place in the contemporary writers. She is a noted Indian-American writer who has solid grasp on the Bengali soil from her childhood. Her narrative aptitude gives opportunity to the readers to understand the psyche of character and his feelings. She made her introduction as a novelist later before that she had started composing short stories and sonnets. Her novels are welcomed by the world with open-heart that are full of riddle and reality. These novels are extremely similar with Indian traditional art which transport the readers into the places known for magic and mysticism.

Chitra Divakaruni's magic realism is the combination of magic and reality with the utilization of people stories, old tales, folklore and legends which are based on an individual's cultural background from around the world. She has utilized the element of dream to extend magical realism as a strategy in her novels. In the dreams of the protagonists the magical things happen that work out in their life. In her novels many lifeless thing and extraordinary creatures can talk like human beings with the protagonist, such as- the spices, snakes, conch etc. In the words of Ismat Sarah Mangla-

"Divakaruni endeavors to weave her perceptions with the element of myth, magic, and antiquated culture close by contemporary culture. Chitra endeavors to unite those things a feeling of old culture and the day by day realities of immigrant life"

'**The Conch Bearer**' was both a mystical mission and an adventurous journey. The young and impoverished boy Anand was fond of magics and wanted to use them for his benefits. Sometimes while working in the tea stall he supposed that if he would have magical powers he would have treated his cruel tea- shop owner. One day he met with an old, poor and hungry man. He thought he could not have money so he offered him, his share of tea. When he came in contact with him, he was surprised that after that he was not feeling cold anymore. He felt some magical powers in the eyes of the old man.

"The old man looked at him. His eyes were...blue? Green? shimmery brown like the eyes of a tiger? Anand couldn't tell. He knew only that something tinged through him like an electric current when the old man looked at him" (Page 11)

The old man told Anand that magics are real and some people can even hold it and practice it. He wanted to take his help in his mission and told him that he came only to him as he believed on magics. He told him about the Brotherhood of Silver Valley and their magical powers. He said-

"Some can look into the future and advise men and women of what to do, and what to avoid. Some can cure sickness of the body and mind. Some transport themselves to places thousands of miles away. Some travel through time to bygone ages. Some know special chants to create rain or storm - or wind and fog -" (Page 25)

Abhaydatta told Anand about the Conch and how it was lost from its rightful home. A self-centred person named Surabhanu came to be the member of Brotherhood but his intention was not good. He didn't want to use his magical powers and powers of the Conch for the betterment of humanity but for himself. He corrupted some of the

members of Brotherhood too. As he was trained in the same Brotherhood, he was able to hide his real intention from them. He took the Conch and ran away from the Silver Valley. He could sense even from distance that his name was called and he can even sensed their location with his magical powers. Abhaydatta told-

"His name is Surabhanu, though it is with reluctance that I name him for you. For in spite of the yantras, he is sure to hear the echo of his name and sense where I am. And in my present condition, I don't have enough power left to face him again". (Page 28)

Abhaydatta wanted to take help of Anand in returning the conch to its rightful place. He tried to convince him telling about the powers of magical conch. He showed him the conch in his small and dark room. Anand was surprised to see the beauty and attraction of the conch. When Abhaydatta took out the conch, Anand was surprised with its force that made him forget everything and relieved him from all stress-

"An enormous force throbbed from it - toward him and into him, warming him and making him lightheaded with happiness. There was music all around him, the sweetest music, as though the stars had come down from the sky and crowded into the room". (Page 37)

Abhaydatta told Anand about the magical powers that each healers of Silver Valley possessed. They vary from each others as they are trained according to their capacity and talents, but according to their temperament they develop one special power. Some of them have ability to travel thousand miles in few moments, ability to cure illness, ability to control and direct weather, ability to control remembrance and forgetting, ability to remove pain, ability to converse with animals, ability to see the future etc. These all powers are given to them for the betterment of human beings. As it is explained-

"Each of the Healers of the Silver Valley is trained in many arts. But according to each one's temperament, he develops one special power. Mine is power of remembrance and forgetting'. 'It means that I can help people to remember what they need to remember, and forget what is better them to forget.'" (Page 38)

Abhaydatta saw Anand's sister Meera who stopped talking suddenly from one day when she was alone at home. He told Anand that she had witnessed a horrifying moment of a man murdering another and she couldn't move beyond that moment. He further added that it happened when she went to fetch water from tube well near the crossroads. He closed his eyes and told that her dress was stained with the blood of the dead man. Anand was surprised how did he know it? He said that he has the ability to help the people remembering and forgetting what is good form them, and what is better for them to forget. He said to Anand-

"I'm taking the memory away from her. She will become, once more, her old lightheaded self. But patience! It takes a little time for the process to work.' he turned to Meera and stroked her hair. 'Be happy, child.'" (Page 40)

The novel is full of magical incidents as when impoverished street girls went with the old man to help him returning the conch to the Silver Valley. Abhaydatta asked her name but she was afraid to tell that her parents lost her when she was very little. She started living under the gap of soft drink stall. Some people called her the sweeper girl, the girl told with a street hard and nonchalant voice. Abhaydatta said with a smile on his face that she wouldn't be without name

from then. The girl was very excited for her new name. Abhaydatta took a piece of paper from his bag and tore that into two parts and asked the girl which one she would want. She selected one of them but it was not quite normal piece of paper, it was a magical one as Anand explained-

“As Anand watched, he saw that indeed one of the papers was on fire. But it was a strange kind of fire. It didn't burn the paper to ashes but only made it glow red, like lighted coals.” (Page 85)

Abhaydatta was a mysterious man full of resources. He has a magical bag in which he could find everything what was required for them. Both Anand and Nisha were amazed that it was indeed a small bag but Abhaydatta could find anything whenever he put his hand inside it. On the way Abhaydatta realised that Surabhanu may find them any time so he guided the children not to wait for him and continue their journey to Silver Valley. He told them if Surabhanu found them, they should not wait for him but escape from there and should try to achieve their target. With his magical powers, he made a map to guide them with his forefingers on cemented floor. He told the children that- “If I am indeed overcome and cannot rejoin you,” Abhaydatta continued, ‘you must go on alone to the silver valley. Look, I am going to draw you a map’

Abhaydatta knelt and drew a line on the cement floor with his forefinger. To Anand's amazement, the line began to glow at once.” (Page 101)

As it was already explained that a healer of the Brotherhood could have many powers, Surabhanu the antagonist of the novel, has many powers too. During their stay in a cave, Anand took the responsibility to stay awake at night. Abhaydatt warned him that one of them must stay alert as Surabhanu may create problems for them. Though Abhaydatta had already made a magical spell around the cave and burn a magical fire that must not be put off the whole night. Still he told Anand that if he sensed anything different he must awake him immediately. There was a terrible weather outside the cave and Anand heard his mother's voice calling him outside, though he was sure that his mother can't reach there at any cost. He was struck in the spell of Surabhanu and went outside and came back with a lot of difficulties. During that course the magical fire was put off and Surabhanu in the shape of wind took Abhaydatt with him while he was sleeping. He found Nisha crying for Abhaydatta saying-

“I saw the wind rushing in,’ Nisha Said. ‘ It had the face of a wild boar. Before Dadaji could wake up, it grabbed him in its teeth.” (Page 135)

After Abhaydatta was lost both Anand and Nisha felt helpless but as Abhaydatta had already instructed them to continue their journey, they thought of the same. They realized the magical powers and their effects recently. Even they found that the cave they stayed for the night was also not real cave but a cave made by the old man with his magical powers. As when they discussed their further plans, Nisha was not willing to move without Abhaydatta, whom they started calling Dadaji. They realized that the size of the cave was shrinking with the passing of time. It was mean that the magic spell of Abhaydatta was weakening with the time, as he had made it for their night stay only. They realized about the cave that-

“It seemed smaller than before, as though the cave was shrinking. Was this, too, because of Abhaydatta's absence? Had he, with his powers, made it a place other than what it

really was? Would it disappear totally when the spell wore off? And the Healer - where was he now, and what was happening to him?” (Page 140)

The old man has a magical bag with him, whenever and whatever he wanted at anytime, he put his hand in it and took that thing out of it. Both Anand and Nisha were amazed to see that he took out things that they need for playing, eating or necessity such as marvels, food, needle etc. Even Nisha remembered that how astonished and happy they both were, when he took out marvels for them.

“How many times had Abhaydatta touched that bag, drawing from it one small marvel or another! How he had delighted in astonishing Anand and Nisha with those marvels.” (Page 140)

Anand and Nisha left alone after the first obstacle. They continued their journey towards the Silver Valley with the help of map, that Abhaydatta made for them on the cemented floor. They found shelter in the hills to protect them from shiver cold. They both were sleeping when Anand felt some furry creature, a squirrel thing on his face. He slapped it away but it didn't scare and came again as it was trying to communicate something. He noticed that one of the shapes of mountain was moving towards them, then another and another.

“Then one of the shapes detached itself from the mountainside and began to move towards him. Another joined it, and another. They moved soundlessly but very fast. Anand had barely shaken Nisha awake before they had blocked off the exit from crevice.” (Page 154)

Chitra Banerjee created the creatures in this novel as well that could speak in human language. The squirrel thing saved them from the mountain trap but Anand and Nisha caught in the web of a group of apes. These apes could speak in half human language. They took them to the another cave, where their king appreciated his followers for their achievement to catch the prisoners. They were frightened what they would do with them. Finally they realized that these apes were the army of Surabhanu, to get the ownership of the Conch. The ape king told them in human language that he was not going to harm them. Anand was afraid when the ape king came close to them and asked them about the Conch-

“Anand couldn't help shuddering as the ape crouched over him. The ape grinned, showing sharp, glittery teeth, growling in that half-human language. ‘Is frightened, man-thing? No need, Grishan no hurt you. Grishan only want treasure.” (Page 157)

Divakaruni used her narrative skills in a an excellent manner as magical realism. She also followed the Indian tradition of story telling, as in Indian stories the Satan, ghost or devils can change the shape and features of their body. They could turn them from human beings to animals or in any other creatures to take revenge or to defeat their enemies. In the novel people not only changes their body and shape but they changes themselves into other creatures as well. After the second obstacle, Surabhanu chased them and finally came in an open fight with Anand. He converted himself into the shape of a snake, then a gaseous cloud, a human shape. These magical shapes could look real due to the artistic beauty of Chitra Banerjee. As nisha was noticing the snake- “And the snake - but no, it wasn't a snake anymore. Instead it was a gaseous cloud that loomed over Anand. As he watched, the cloud grew more solid, taking human shape.

The face was still indistinct, but he could see the glitter of Surabhanu's diadem already, atop the head." (Page 185)

One of the most important aspect of the novel that Conch started talking with Anand after the first obstacle, when they lost Abhayadatta. The Conch spoke according to its own choice and stopped whenever Anand needed to talk to it. When Anand found Abhaydatta's bag then also it asked Anand 'Do you think, it is by chance you found the master healer's bag? This time also when Anand felt that he was failed in front of Surabhanu's powers. Although he did everything, he could do and it was his duty to hide and save the Conch from Surabhanu. It was Conch itself who told him to take it out and use it to defeat the enemy of Silver Valley but Anand didn't know how to use it. The Conch said to Anand-

"Stand up, Anand,' the conch said, 'and take me out. Don't be afraid. Use me. I give you permission.'

'How shall I use you?' Anand asked. But already, an image had flashed inside his head." (Page 187)

Finally they reached the Silver Valley and placed the Conch to its rightful place. Nisha and Anand already realized that the squirrel thing was no one other than Abhaydatt, their dadaji. They wanted that he should come back to his real human body but it was very difficult even for the best healers of Silver Valley, as he has spent too much time in an animal body. The magical spells and chanting were able to bring him into human body but he couldn't speak a single word. The healers informed Anand and Nisha that-

"For the last three days, the best of our shape-changing healers have been working with him, chanting and praying and calling upon spells of recovery, and they have managed to change him back into his human form. But he hasn't spoken a word, and it is not clear whether his mind is still the animal mind that he had to take on along with the animal body." (Page 219)

The Silver Valley was full of different types of magical spells and magical blocks and buildings such as the Tower of Wind Watcher, the Hall of Seeing, the Arbour of Water etc. One of them was 'The Hall of Seeing'. When everything was all right, Abhayadatta came back in his human body and sense. It was decided that Anand and Nisha should also be included in the healers of Silver Valley. Nisha had no family but Anand was different so healers offered him, what he wanted to do, either to join Brotherhood or go back to home. Anand was worried about him family so he wished to see his family. Abhaydatt offered him that he would make the family forget everything about Anand, as his specialization was in remembering and forgetting. Anand was taken to the Hall of Seeing, the hall grew dark and the segment of wall started to change colors. Suddenly he saw his family in the pretty dining room of a flat in modern city. For Anand surprise his father had also returned from abroad. He saw-

"As he spoke, the Hall of seeing grew dark, and the segment of the wall in front of them began to change colour, turning first green, then blue, then a multitude of hues, orange and yellow and red, as though it were an evening sky. A surge of power, like electricity, shot from Abhaydatta's hand into Anand's." (Page 236)

Anand finally decided to stay among the Brotherhood of Silver Valley. The ceremony of Anand started as per customs of Silver Valley. As Anand was special not only that he has contributed a lot in the return of the Conch but he had talked to the Conch and in return the Conch also

talked to him. The Chief Healer also appreciated him saying, that they drew strength from the Conch meditating on it but he was special to whom the Conch itself has talked. He said-

"Amongst all of us in the Brotherhood who have been blessed with gifts, you have unique one. We meditate on conch and draw our strength from it, but you have spoken to it. And, more importantly, it has spoken back to you." (Page 258)

It is due to the magic of Chitra that Conch not only talk but suggested and guided Anand at various time during their journey to Silver Valley. At last Anand had a question in mind to ask from the Conch. He asked it, why it could not stop Surabhanu from stealing it, because it had the power to burn him like a crisped potato. The Conch replied that the Brotherhood was growing lax and complacent, that's why a person like Surabhanu entered in the Silver Valley. It further said if he could stop Surabhanu how would Anand and Nisha come to the Silver Valley. Anand put the question of Surabhanu's death, who was the keeper of Conch. On the question of Surabhanu's death the Conch remarked on the human beings as-

"Ah, death! The conch gave a sigh. 'You humans are always making such a hullabaloo about death. His body was old and tired - it was time for him to crack that mold and emerge from it, to take on a higher form. He knew this as he was going, and was not sorry - and nor was I - for he died performing his duty.'" (Page 264)

Conclusion

We can simply say that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is unraveled champion in narrative techniques. With the help of the above stated examples, we can simply prove that Divakaruni has inborn talent as a great story teller. She has inherited all these qualities in her root land India. The present novel is full of magical realism and adventurous activities. The Conch Bearer is the highest order literary fiction full of mythical and mystical adventures. Chitra started writing short stories before novels and she got a huge welcome in the world for her stories but she is greatly successful in writing fiction. In an interview Divakaruni said-

"I've been writing more fictions because I'm interested in exploring relationships and showing the differences that develop in characters".

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