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Magic Realism in the Novels of Zulfikar Ghose

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Abstract

Zulfikar Ghose, a writer of Indo-Pakistani origin is a prolific writer of poems, short stories, novels and critical works. Often experimental in form and language, his novels are invariably imbued with a sense of magic realism to create a metaphysical reality. His forte lies in the use of language which is lyrical and replete with vivid imagery. Unlike other postcolonial, South Asian writers Ghose avoids to follow the stereotypical categories set for the postcolonial writers where focus in a work of art is mostly on content. His most of the novels are set in South America which is neither his native nor adopted land. In this paper my endeavour is to analyze four of his novels, *A New History of Torments, Figures of Enchantment*, *Don Bueno* and *The Triple Mirror of the Self* and to locate these works in a narrative tradition – magic(al) realism so as to understand and decipher various perspectives and layers of meaning in these works of art. The use of South American unknown, haunting interiors and marvelously exotic settings coalesce with the constantly surprising situations in which Ghose places his characters to bring out certain metaphysical notions about human life.

Key Words: Postcolonial, Magic Realism, Oxymoron, Metaphysics, Landscape, Home

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Zulfikar Ghose, a prolific writer of poems, short stories, novels and critical works, refuses to be categorized as a politically committed writer of a certain ideology or resistance strategy. He is not a usual postcolonial writer who takes up sides in a political sense. His forte lies in the use of language which is lyrical and replete with vivid imagery. The images of Punjab, the sublime beauty of South American landscapes, the wilderness of the jungles of the Amazon etc collaborate with the most ambitious and experimental form and styles in his works. His idée fix with form, a passion to always make it new and a struggle to find a style which suites his collage of subject matter makes it difficult to put him in a particular category of writers. He is always more concerned with 'how it is said' rather than 'what is said'. His unwavering stance in favour of form as opposed to subject matter and ideas proves contrary to the tastes of the critics of South Asian writers and therefore, the apparent reason of the lack of attention towards his works. Ghose in his novels experiments with form and theme and these are invariably imbued with a sense of magic realism to create a metaphysical reality.

The terms 'magic realism' and 'magical realism' are highly in vogue since 1980s and are variously discussed and understood by critics and academics. The terms are oxymorons describing the imposed relationship of two discordant terms. Magical realism in recent years has become a popular mode of narration because it follows the inclusion of contradictory elements and thus this narrative mode, as a postcolonial device, allows seeing and discussing reality in an alternative manner quite different from Western interpretation of reality. The terms magic/magical realism originated from the German '*Magischer Realismus'* which was translated into the Dutch '*magisch realisme'*, the English 'magic realism' and eventually the Spanish '*realismo magico'*. The term 'magic realism' was coined by a German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a new form of post-expressionist painting that he witnessed developing in the Weimar Republic. Although, the term was first and principally associated with painting, but the majority of magic(al) realist cultural production since the coining of the term in 1925 has been in fiction. Regarding the origin of the term there is no consensus, but some art historians are of the view that the first person to write of a magical realism was not, as is commonly thought, the German art historian, Franz Roh, in 1925, but the Romantic poet and philosopher, Novalis, around 1798. Friedrich Freiherr Von Hardenberg, better known by his pen-name of Novalis was a German Romantic poet and philosopher. He was the first person to use the concept of 'magical

realist' in 1798. Even to many critics and art historians the Italian writer and critic, Massimo Bontempelli, has always been a more relevant figure than Roh to magical realism's genealogy. Bontempelli, in 1926, started a journal *900* in which he expressed "his desire to further a new mythography that, unlike the fabrications of the avant-garde, would respect the continuities between past and present. The kind of art he proposed was one that would find miracles in the midst of ordinary and everyday life, and he specifically – and, it seems, independently of Roh or Novalis – named this art magical realism" (Qtd. in Warnes27).

Although, magical realism has largely been associated with Latin America, but the fact of the matter is that there are neither geographical constraints on where it is found nor any restrictions regarding the purposes for which it might be used. Regardless of the place of origin of the term, it was first given general currency by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier in the 1950s (*lo real maravilloso*). Although "the international recognition of Latin American magic(al) realists such as Carpentier and most particularly Garcia Marquez has led to a misconceived assumption that magic(al) realism is specifically Latin American. This ignores both the Latin American connections of early 20th century European art and literature and the very different related German art movement known as 'magic realism' with its influences within Europe" (Bowers 16-17). It is not possible to confine it to any particular region, language, literary movement or tradition. There are writers like " Kafka, Bulgakov, Grass, Suskind, D.M. Thomas, Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, Robert Nye, Jeannette Winterson, André P. Brink, and many others who show clearly that a range of cultural trajectories can be established for the existence of magical realism in different contexts" (Warnes 28). By now, the term remains one of the most understood, misunderstood, overused and loosely used terms that there are many critics and writers who want to do away with it.

Magical realism is a narrative mode of fiction in which magical and realistic elements co-exist with equal ontological status and also presents magical and realistic happenings where, "the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism" (Zamora 3). Magical realism forms a new perspective by blending together two opposing aspects of the oxymoron – the magical and the realist. Magical realism as disruptive narrative mode erases the difference between the two opposing terms of the magical and the realist. This 'discordia concors' kind of a feature of magical realism makes it "a mode suited to exploring … and transgressing… boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic" (Zamora 5). Amaryll Chanady describes magical realism as a narrative mode which permits a point of view in which there is an "absence of obvious judgments about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of the world view expressed by characters in the text" (30). In a kind of willing suspension of disbelief the reader with the narrator follows in accepting both the realistic and magical viewpoints of reality equally. There is a growing corpus of literary works that draws upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folktale, yet does so in such a way that neither of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other. This capacity to resolve the tension between two discursive systems usually

thought of as mutually exclusive must constitute the starting point for any inquiry into magical realism.

Zulfikar Ghose uses it as a postcolonial mode of narrative, writes about the disempowered indigenous people of South American interiors whose cultural beliefs and practices are constantly at threat. As Marquez expresses the unrest and violence and confusion of Colombian politics or Latin America in general, so does Zulfikar Ghose talk about bloodshed and unrest of the Partition. The horrendous past and present uncertainty offers itself to magical realism for its scope to bring forth the 'unearthy tidings' of a troubled past and nostalgic present. Unlike Rushdie who uses magic realism to "exercise his preference for non-naturalism without foregoing the kinds of political and cultural engagement that are usually associated with social realism" (Warnes 99), Zulfikar Ghose very subtly deconstructs the human/inhuman binary. In his novel *The Triple Mirror of the Self* where the 'civilized' Westerners bulldozed their way into interiors of Xurupa, a tribal habitation, to display a naked show of greed. Refusing to call the mayhem, which is done by humans, as inhuman the character Pons retorts "why inhuman? … Change that to human. Only it so uninhibited, so unmodified by any pretence of hypocrisy, of civilization, unaccepting of any secular or religious law, that it seems a base corruption of what we piously term human" (Ghose, *The Triple* 37). Zulfikar Ghose wrote to question the uncertainty of his national identity. Unlike Ondaatje, Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, Zulfikar Ghose's magical realist happenings occur in Latin American. Ondaatje's happen in Srilanka while as Rushdie's and Ghosh's occur in India, Pakistan, Britain and America. One of the sources of magical realism as we find in Zulfikar Ghose's novels is the shock of the new. The South American unknown, haunting interiors, marvelously exotic settings and constantly surprising situations placing buildings of grand hotels and technological advancements in the midst of far away wilderness seem to be extraordinary. "Magical realist fiction relies upon the reader's trust and acceptance of the forms of fictional reality offered to them" (Bowers 40). Ghose writes about places and situations which are unfamiliar to the reading public. He seems to be escaping the reality in his quest for identity. He sometimes leaves behind the magical realism to talk about horrors and brutality of Partition in a realistic manner and like Marquez and Guntur Grass, his magical realism seems to be emanating from the harsh realities of Partition and the effects of extremely horrific violence and the subsequent uprootedness which Ghose as a child witnessed. In the third part of the novel *The Triple Mirror of the Self* Ghose in realistic manner talks about the historical realities of his childhood in pre-Independence Bombay and the subsequent bloodshed and migration of people in the Partition.

In the words of Fredric Jameson postmodernism is an "attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (3). But the magical realists take recourse to use historical references and historical revisions in their writings and thereby the relationship between magical realism and postmodernism can be ascertained. In Ghose's novel *The Figure of Enchantment*, which is a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* the importance of history and memory in the present of characters is brilliantly put forth. Gamboa now on the island of Santa Barbara for many years has almost a faded memory of what he has lost – his daughter and wife. But the dim thoughts of his loss and the design of history still

haunt him. His present reality is not less than a fantastic existence in which "a dead man … dead now, alive still, the father and the daughter too dead, though each morning revived their breath, the voice persisted, the mind's phantoms strolled solidly on the beach, the warm breath of the voice came and went like the tide. Another's past is your past, the other that you now are is not of the self you formerly had but of some other" (Ghose, *Figures* 118). "Magical realism is a mode suited to exploring and transgressing boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographic or generic" (Zamora 5). Zulfikar Ghose's novel, *Don Bueno,* travels a vast range of South American landscapes, from muggy and mysterious jungles of the interior to the Atlantic and Pacific seacoasts and the crystalline heights of the Andes. A weaver of magical spells, Zulfikar Ghose in *Don Bueno*, with deceptive simplicity resonates with rich symbols, dreamlike sequences, does not lose touch with this world. *Don Bueno,* a mythic tale of Oedipal cycles, fate and patricide follows an uncertain prophesy where the son must both abandon and become a father, and the father must always embrace death in the person of the son. Calderon had no alternative but to fulfill a bewildering yet murderous destiny. The exhortation of his grandmother when she, as if caught in some urgency of fate, advises the boy Calderon to "Go, go and find him, if you please! Run from the woman, and go and find your father, hug him, embrace him, but stick a knife into his chest and let him fall at your feet. Is this why he gave you life? Ha!" (Ghose, *Don* 72-73). Here in the beginning of the novel a man named Napoleon Calderon is killed in a brawl with a stranger in a tavern in Santa Rosa. The murdered man, a cruel sensuous man also called Bueno had long ago abandoned the woman who he had impregnated and was about to bear him a child – a son. And, not very surprisingly, comes to fore that the stranger who killed Napoleon Calderon is none other than his unknown son, Cesar. Entrapped into a vicious cycle of destiny Cesar after having a childhood of loneliness and isolation grows into a man who himself did the same as his father had done i.e., abandoned a woman when she was pregnant with his son. He left them uninformed without knowing exactly the reason of his fleeing, reaching to the isolation of Santa Rosa. Here among the locals he earned himself the name Don Bueno because he adopted an abandoned girl – Sofia and devoted his life in bringing her up like a true father. However what was bound to happens ultimately took place: the patricide inevitably is repeated. Ghose as fatalists, here in the novel, shows very magnificently that tragedy befalls over the life of characters, in spite of their moral failings, over which they have no control. As Mrs Sonstroem says in her unceasing monologue, "it is terrible to be afflicted by hideous passions, to be touched by some sinister finger at birth" (Ghose, *Don* 127). Calderon's passion makes him to seduce women, visit brothels and even leads to the rape of his daughter. Calderon who was hiding not from his wife but from passions, sexuality, and procreation is welcomed in a village which does not give him a wife; instead, it gives him a child. And the child comes with a verse hidden in its basket:

My name is Sofia, by no man chosen.
I am the daughter of ice and fire.
Only he can love me who is frozen
On the burning lips of desire. (Ghose, *Don* 143).

The enigma brings a final alliance between dormant passion and ostensible frigidity in Calderon and obliquely heralds the final, disastrous incest. In the course of time the abandoned son of the second Don Bueno grew up to be a terrorist named Simon Bolivar, lands in Santa Rosa. While visiting a tavern he had a spat with a stranger and ended up in killing the stranger who turns to be none other than his father and thus the cycle of inexorable destinies is completed. Ghose in a very transparent and improbable way (which are part of the magic or super realism of the novel), blends closely the "realistic convention with magical elements … not done for its own sake but to produce that symptomatic eerie shimmer which must be seen as an attempt to express what is nearly inexpressible" (Maillard 12).

In Ghose's novels like *A New History of Torments*, a reader willingly observes the effects of events instead of seeking causes. The unusual turn of events, unexpected twists and turns in the lives of characters who get displaced and alienated, neither the writer provides a causal explanation nor the reader seeks any deductive analysis but instead observes them enduring the pain of alienation. In this novel, like in *The Incredible Brazilian*, Ghose brings together the rich scenic aspects with fairy tale plotting to create a grim, dreamlike world in some Latin American landscape. The plot and themes are manipulated in an intriguing manner to produce a dazzling and elaborate cycle of magical realistic happenings. Jorge Rojas Jimenez, a ranch owner ditches his wife, to whom he had been married to for twenty two years, for a mistress, Margarita Aparicio, whom he was planning to bring to his great estate. Soon his obscure passion for his mistress portends a series of fateful errands, in the lives of people in the novel, starting with the entry of a middle-aged rebel, Mark Kessel, driving in his golden Lincoln Continental. He along with Rojas' two children met with an accident in the dead of the woods and lost their way. They, completely lost, go their separate ways. Rojas' son Rafael wanders about, till he's taken in by one of South America's richest men, Oyarzun, who has created a fortress-estate away from the gaze of civilization. Rafael falls in love with Oyarzun's hard-hearted, bitterly disillusioned daughter who was an ex-mistress of a Cuban agent. Meanwhile, Rafael's sister Violeta lands into the clutches of a rogue and barely escapes rape and is subsequently taken in by a family that is on visiting terms with the Oyarzun. The brother and sister, first losing their home and then their names, do not meet for many years, however, until a cruel, intricate plot brings them together in an incestuous embrace that drives Violeta to commit suicide. Kessel, the dilettante anthropologist, in his attempt to usurp his brother-in-law's business empire sends his nephew Jason off to search for an El Dorado-like jungle paradise on the Amazon, knowing himself very well that the Jungle will devour Jason once he enters into it. Before meeting Violeta what Jason finds is a nightmare-world of savagery, men-as-conjugal-slaves, and a world full of rage that turns him into a rapist and murderer. What keeps the erratic narrative of the novel intact is the feeling of disillusionment for the characters whose passions and fixations turn out to be disastrous. Oyarzun's pessimism towards life and human concerns where "life really is not worth living and to be a human being has to be the worst possible condition to endure" (Ghose, *A New* 257), where "paradise is not necessarily a desirable habitat". To delineate the deep agony, uncertainties, and complexities of existence, naturalistic modes of narration do not suffice. The imaginative scene making, dark ironies, unpredictability of events and fable like qualities wield

discordant elements in a magical realistic manner. The fusion of reality and fantasy with a notion to create a world according to its own laws where fantasy leads to intuitive truth and reality leads back to fantasy so that as in *A New History of Torments* the myth demands that Rafael and Violeta part. Hence, after the automobile crash, Rafael conveniently falls asleep to let Violeta disappear. Sometimes episodes are introduced specifically to reinforce the fairy tale element. In fact, parallelism, juxtaposition and coincidence are all aspects of improbability in the novel. That Oyarzun's wife deserts Oyarzun, Olivia deserts Rafael and Rojas deserts Manuela is as much a product of artifice as Rojas and Oyarzun having two children, both of the same age. That Kessel's car should be made into a shape to conform to the maps that Jason and Osorio possess is another such coincidence. In Ghose's novels "The balance between the reality and magic is so subtle that it is hardly perceived. While the reader responds subjectively to the characters who desperately search for a paradise that is regenerative and satisfying, he is also conscious of the careful signposting that insists on the artifice and the structure" (Kanaganayakam 285). Ghose appears to suggest in *Torments* and *Don Bueno* that "the mythical and the unreal are still very much a part of reality" (Kanaganayakam 267).

A basic definition of Magic realism, then, sees it as a mode of narration that naturalises or normalizes the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth of referentiality. In the light of the above definition Ghose's novel *The Figures of Enchantment* has almost all the characteristic features of a magical realistic novel. The characters in the novel desperately crave for an alternative, imaginative, magical transformation of their impoverished lives. In the novel Vivado, the underworld dream merchant says, "people crave for an alternative world to the one in which they live. They'll go any distance to see if it isn't to be found somewhere" (185). The essence of Ghose's concept of art and life lies in a sustained urge and deep desire for alternatives. This urge for alternatives in life and fiction gives birth not only to creativity but also to destruction. Zulfikar Ghose gives this central human longing an unexpected twist by letting his characters get what they want. In a series of accidents of chance the characters deflect from their usual ordinary lives into a magico-realistic world. Felipe Gamboa a humble civil servant in an uncertain South American city lives a life fantasizing alternative worlds, couldn't make sense of the bizarre series of events that lead him from a lunch break in the park one day into the clutches of the military police in his unnamed South American country and finally to the shores of a remote island where undreamed-of adventures in sensuality and metaphysics await him. He always dreamt of wealth and a prosperous future for his daughter Mariana. A sudden bizarre turn of events transports him to a remote Pacific island away from his wife and daughter. Federico Chagra, the boyfriend of Mariana, also had dreams for her, but his poverty and notorious family fails him. He steals money from his father to win his fortune at the cockfights, but stumbles blindly into the magical shop of Popayan. Popayan sells him an amulet and a magic cloak, announcing the major theme of the novel: "Nothing can protect you from your desires. You will wish and you will receive more than you can bear to possess" (Ghose, *Figures* 69). The corrupt Popayan gives him an amulet which sends him off to an exotic journey. The magical effects of the amulet in fulfilling

the wishes of Federico's wishes doesn't seem imposed on the plot as in the words of Jorge Luis Borges, while discussing the role of magic in narrative art, remarks that "magic is not the contradiction of cause and effect but its crown, or nightmare. The miraculous is no less strange in that world [of primitive savages] than it is in the world of astronomers. All the laws of nature as well as those of the imagination govern it" (214). Federico's wishes for "excitement, women, wealth" all come true in a series of fabulous adventures. He after sixteen years meets up Gamboa in that paradisiacal island in a brilliant twist of a haunting story of fulfilled and unfulfilled desires. However, getting what they desire turns out to be more than the characters can bear. In a series of deftly ironic plot moves, Ghose exposes their dreams as destructive illusions. But the discovery that each dream is empty only leads the men to formulate new fantasies of power, wealth, and love. Overwhelming needs for alternative worlds keep all the characters permanent prisoners of their self-created figures of enchantment. The elusive, destructive, desires, haunted dreams and intangible secrets of characters of the novel are enacted in magical realistic mode of fiction.

The author of *A New History of Torments*, *The Figures of Enchantment* and *Don Bueno* Zulfikar Ghose in his latest novel *A Triple Mirror of the Self* tries to articulate the indeterminate pangs of remembrance and loss, of roots, memory and identity. Through a series of symbols, magical happenings, and rituals, Ghose wants to bring home the illusory nature of reality. The novel features the character Urim who wanders the world, and yet in finding the end of his journey, he sees the mirror image of its beginning and exists where he had started from. In *The Triple Mirror of the Self*, Zulfikar is complex in organization with shifting narrators, shifting narratives, and a backdrop that spans continents and climes. The novel is divided into three parts. The first part "The Burial of the Dead" is set in an uncertain part of Amazonia, in a village called Suxavat in the great rainy forest where Urimba, the scattered one, named after the immigrant tree by the natives, has now been residing there for some years. He has come there from 'civilized' world to live a nameless secluded life to bury his self. There is continuous flow of people coming to this settlement from the modern world only tempted by various needs like finding gold. Life in these woods was governed by rituals, myths, magic, fantastic stories like the one of a 'twice-born man', a 'man sitting under the tree of rebirth' and a 'woman with her two parrots on her shoulders'. Engrossed in their ritualistic match making between the tribes, Ghose at the very outset gives an idea about the magical realist mood of the novel. "'Oh monkeys, monkeys!' Tambour interrupted. 'Look at your listeners! Their eyes are disturbed. There is no ice in our world, what are you talking about? We have forgotten the blues of our oceans. There is no life-bearing lotus in our rivers. Why are you troubling us with distant dreams?' … Tambour clapped his hands and called, 'Bastianini, Rustomo, come, show these monkeys what you can do. Come on, let's have some real magic. Enough of these stories that trouble the souls of the living" (Ghose, *A New* 13). In this magnificent primeval setting, Ghose creates a fascinating play of illusion with ancient myths and rituals and memory, especially in Urim's infatuation with Horuxtla – the daughter of illusions and with the chapter on the monkey dancers. The primeval and peaceful atmosphere could withstand for long as the greedy and acquisitive civilisation marched into the village and rampantly exterminated the indigenous population, even forcing

Urim to escape and trek for days to capture a glimpse of the snowcapped Andes, a final moment in which he sees mirrored his beginnings. Ghose in the novel follows a reverse chronology where the narrator in part two, 'Voyage and Pilgrim' changes as an American academic who has been accidentally presented with the memoirs of Urim, and is now busy tracing Urim's earlier life in London and the US as Shimomura or Shimmers. The last part, 'Origins of the Self' loses the mystery and power of the first two parts of the novel. It is in realistic mode, set in the Indian subcontinent. The hero in his quest for his origin travels backwards across continents to ultimately reach Bombay. Here, in this part, the narrator, who becomes now Roshan, recounts the adolescent years spent in Bombay and ultimately in his journey end up in the foothills of the Andes.

Zulfikar Ghose also uses myths in his novels especially the magical realistic story of the Indian tribes in the interiors where a whole tribe turned impotent and subsequently died. A spider known as 'black widow' infested the whole village when with the power of magic the men of enemy tribes "transformed themselves into spiders and crawled into this land. And one night they crept up the legs of all the women of the tribe and wove an invisible and impenetrable web across their sex" (Ghose, *Don* 111). Ghose through the magic realist use of language and situations gives a postcolonial perspective: Captain Afonso says "You should know this about any human being, however primitive. He inherits a code of symbols whether he is born in the jungle out there or in London. For we all are creatures of unaccountable compulsions. … Your uniformed soldier is no different from a painted warrior. Your primitive may eat his enemy's flesh and your civilized man will do the same thing, though only metaphorically, but neither will sleep with his sister" (Ghose, *A New* 175). He underscores the usefulness of magic realism in a world where having only a single version of story is dangerous: "there could be no wisdom because there could be no relief from the body's pain; and the mind's bemusement with abstract thought was only a strategy to distract itself from an infinite despair" (Ghose, *Figures* 63).

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