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## Dialectics of Magical Realism in Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper attempts to study critically of the term Magical Realism with regard to the novel 'The Red Earth and Pouring Rain' written by Vikram Chandra. It will try to answer the most common and skeptic question of calling the term as the fanciest term. It analyses that how far Chandra is successful in exploring the term in his text. The analysis of the text confirms that the term is neither escapism nor a Fantasy; rather it is a branch of serious fiction and also it explores certain violation and truth which is part of contemporary society. The narration is done from the perspective of those people who are part of our world. There is an old White-faced monkey in the story who was once a man named Sanjay Parasher in one of his past births. In the novel the Monkey talks like a man. It is not a fantasy element but an expression of the 'reality' of people who believe in the concept of Karma Theory and reincarnation of birth until one attains salvation. It focuses on the depiction of reality of the people whose reality is different from ours. Chandra's usage of this narrative technique in 'Red Earth and Pouring Rain' convinces the readers with the reality so thoroughly that even 'unreal' elements of the story will prove to be real or would be of least concern; the reader is be taken up to the heart throbbing experiences while reading the novel.

**Keywords: magical realism, Indian fiction.**

### **Introduction**

The term Magic Realism was first introduced in Germany in 1920, and later it was adopted by the writers of Central America in 1940s before it mused to Latin America in 1955. All these periods are inter-linked in literary mode and art. The term took its root in Europe and thereafter the revolution influenced Latin America and acclaimed international recognition. Hence the pioneers of this artistic cum literary revolution were the German Art critic Franz Roh in 1920, the mid twentieth century Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier and another Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli (1920-1930). In the mid-twentieth century the Latin American literary critic Angel Flores and late twentieth century Latin American novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez also registered their names in the contribution towards the term. Magical realism is often regarded as

a regional trend, restricted to the Latin American writers who popularized it as a literary form. In the critical anthology, the first of its kind, editors Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris in *Magical Realism : History, Theory, Community*, show magical realism to be an international movement with a wide-ranging history and a significant influence among the literatures of the world. In essays on texts by writers as diverse as Toni Morrison, Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, Abe Kobo, Gabriel García Márquez, and many others, magical realism is examined as a worldwide phenomenon.

### **Magical Realism in Indian Fiction**

In Indian writing in English Salmaan Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Vikram Chandra, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Nina Sibal and Shashi Tharoor popularized the term in their fiction. Indian culture is rich with different languages where more than hundred languages are used as mode of communication within the country. The dominance of English language in Indian writing is but an obvious result of British presence in India. After Rushdie there several contemporary novelists have employed the term. The contemporary writers are skilled in narrative techniques offered through Magical realism.

#### ***Red Earth and Pouring Rain***

The study critically examines Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995). Vikram Chandra is a prominent name in Indian writing in English. He was born in 1961 in Mumbai and has also published *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997) and *Sacred Games* (2007).

*Red Earth and Pouring Rain* is a lengthy magical realist narrative work which includes almost two centuries description in it. About the title of the novel the author defines in one of his notes that it has been taken from a classical Tamil poem, by Cempulappeyanirar. (poem is quoted in the text of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, published by Faber and Faber, 233). It is not a simple narration rather it includes certain elements of lengthy Hindu epics: *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The evidence of confession can be quoted from the interview conducted by Albertazzi: "As I wrote it, *Red Earth* seemed a novel quite remarkably put out of fashion. I mean its form comes from the stories of *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* which my mother and aunt used to tell me when I was small. This type of sprawling narrative, with its juxtapositions and unexpected meetings is an ancient Indian form." (Alberzatti interview, 72).

#### **Blend of *Real* and *Unreal***

Chandra has inter-mingled the world of mortal and immortal in his narration. Hindu gods – Yama, Ganesha and Hanumana and a white faced monkey who was a Brahmin in his previous life are the characters who represent the blurred line drawn between magic and realism. There are certain incidents in the novel which take readers to an adventurous journey and the story

meanders between India and USA. On the other side characters like Ashok, Mrinalini, Abhay and Saira belong to the real world – the world of mortals. The encounter of these two separate categories of different worlds essentially increases interest among readers and draws the novel into literary perception. The beginning of the first few pages reveals the feature of the term magical realism, the white-faced monkey who is the soul of Sanjay Parasher who in turn introduces himself to the family in a very mysterious way. There are certain extraordinary events in protagonist's life. The white-faced monkey is shot by Abhay (Americanized through his university education) because of the act of stealing his pair of jeans. Such action horrifies Abhay's mother Mrinalini and his father Ashok. Therefore they take the monkey in and nurse him to bring back to health. Followed by series of incidents Yama the god of death and Hanumana, the god of Monkey also known as 'sankata mochana' sets a wager for Sanjay (white-faced monkey) to save his life on the condition that at least two hours every day the audience must be kept entertained by the art of storytelling. Sanjay narrates his own story by portraying a character named Sandeep. He represents him as an Indian wanderer who goes into an ashram in a jungle. He befriends a sadhu over there and narrates his own experiences and takes his audience around different countries, kings and battles.

The extraordinary strikes in the beginning itself where the wounded monkey after nursing returns to good health although the shooting turns over and allows him to remember his past life as a poet named Sanjay Parasher. This novel offers a structure of stories within stories. There is a storyteller who tells story to an audience and the audience that responds. His narration swiftly moves across time and space, taking in several centuries of Indian history, nineteenth century England and contemporary America. The fiction is blended with history and myth all around the world. It includes the historical character Sikander based directly on a historical figure from the nineteenth century. Also it depicts the adventures of Benoit de Boigne (1791-1830), the German Walter Reinhardt (1720-1778), and the Irish George Thomas (1756-1802). Through Thomas, Chandra invents Vehi an archaic forest in which he loses himself for years.

In the novel there are events which are woven parallel and so casually connected that it does not appear to violate the objective reality. It attempts to convince us by the details that particular event describes by confirming that the details are not mere a chance but are linked for a purpose. For example, there is a scene in which the character Sandeep visits to the 'ashram of Shankar' and tells a tale. While narrating the tale he gives a weird description of a woman in a completely horrifying and isolated place in the dense forest. The presence of a mysterious woman might appear to be most 'unrealistic' at first instance but soon it captures the ground of reality that leads to win confidence of the reader and also categories itself from being called as mere Fantastic. The woman's description as 'a thin, dark-skinned woman, dressed in bark, seated crosslegged on a deerskin, head bent over, so that her shaggy black hair hung down to brush her shins. She was peering unblinking, into her cupped hands' (29). Such description might take up reader to the fantasy or miracle. One can make the assertion that the description is not casual. Because the scene further describes 'the dead leaves caught in the dark hair and the fingernails

that had grown till they cured around, twisted and fantastic.’ (29) This type of narration is made not only for the sake of tale to be ornamented with symbol or metaphor in a novel, but a sincere quest is expressed to show determination. Moreover it also reveals the strength of women’s determination as well. It reveals the fact that if a woman determines to focus on something no power can interrupt or break her strong determination. The firm decision or quest for something made by woman leads to success. The strength of women is subtly detailed in one of the *Puraanas* –Durga, Kaali and Chandika forms. Hence such description successfully breaks the monotonous belief of fantasy in the magical realistic novel. The further description of this event answers that the events written are linked with a purpose; not mere for the sake of writing.

She did tell me, however, that she had fled the world of men and women, disgusted with its inconstancy and the ephemeral nature of its pleasures. Fleeing, one day she had found herself in that clearing and had resolved to find the solution, the reason, the secret, or die... ‘Your will is too harsh; your austerities burn the inhabitants of the three worlds; what is it you meant?’ And she replied –‘There is no completeness; nothing endures, nothing lives; there is only change, unreasoning, unreasonable; only birth and death repeating the same story each time, yet different; why?’ the voice laughed— ‘Why, you know already; look in your hands.’ As she looked down into her hands, rainwater dripping from her forehead made a little pool she saw love, birth and death, poets and warriors books and armies, the wheel turning, turning. (30-31)

For ages human insight has been searching an answer to the very question of its purpose of existence. Therefore in the novel portrayal of the strange women is a symbolic representation of human quest for identity and its connection with nature and God.

There is another series of events in the novel that proves to be one of the examples which supports the magical realist text in regard with the perception that it conveys a different world-view and those effects relate to the ways in which this world’s-view is different. Readers sense from the very first page of the novel that the ‘white-faced monkey’ has been introduced by the author with a purpose both keeping the text in mind and also the religious belief that Hindu Mythology deals with considering Monkey as symbol of Lord Hanumana. Soon after settling down the deal between Lord Yama, and the white-faced Monkey (Sanjay Parasher, the Poet – in his past birth) in front of Lord Hanumana, Mr. Ashok Mirsa, Mrs Mrinalini, Abhay and Saira the narration of the story moves in flashback. Time does not march in the magical realist text. The past is present in the whole narration. There is a great shift in the narrative’s time sequence which reflects the reality which is now almost out of time. In Chandra’s novel there are certain events that keep returning in the present. The time does slowly move through generations but it does not appear to violate the objective reality. Rather the description of events links up well to convince reader with its detail. For example, when the charge of narration in the novel is taken

up by Abhay who shares his experiences about America, Tom and Amanda James— the readers do not feel the loss of connectivity with the story since magical realist novels use narration as one of the strong tools. Chandra has depicted the most ordinary event as miraculous and the miraculous as the simplest one. This miraculous is depicted so well that it is not taken as awe by the readers. There is an incident in the beginning where white-faced monkey introduces himself for the first time to the Mirsa family.

‘Without thinking, delighted by this strange toy, I pressed ‘i’; intoxicated, I let my claws dance over the keys, watching the following hieroglyphic manifest itself on the sheet: ‘iamparasher.’ (11) This most miraculous event of the novel has been represented by Chandra as most ordinary thing of the incidents. Its narrative technique is used as a tool by Chandra to describe the realities of characters. For example, Lord Yama, symbol of death, appears to take away white-faced monkey’s life as well. He has even explored those communities which are no more come as the mainstream of our culture. Chandra has explored the belief of religious believers for who in spiritual is always present and miracles can be any time around. Such believers have faith that God himself can reveal directly. Therefore, the readers with skeptic thought and mind soon withdraw the false impression of taking Magical realist novels as fantasy.

As far as Hindu/ Indian readers are considered the connection between deliverance and understanding of novel can be well accepted, but the non Indian readers may appear with some doubt, could a Monkey take up the charge of human activity? Such as, a monkey typing or writing through type- writer or on page respectively; that very metamorphosed act of an ape acting like human being is well justified by Chandra through Yama

Instead of attending the Monkey dharma, you’ve haunted the dwellings of humans, begging to be captured, to be reintroduced, in one way or another, to the society of these clumsy but admittedly lovable creatures. In one life you allowed yourself to be captured by a princeling’s hunters, and spent your time happily amusing spoilt young royalty; in another, you allied yourself with a blind holy man, thus adding to his reputation as a miracle worker and enabling him to carry on a life of debauchery and dissolution. In all your monkey-lives, you’ve ignored your natural relatives and hidden by ventilators and windows, listening to the speech of another species; haven’t you noticed how easily you understood what these friends of yours were saying?(15)

The complete fiction of Chandra is narrated between India and the USA; he has explored some events that appeared in Benaras, and the readers are taken up to another land through Thomas George, the land of Rajputana. Chandra, similar to Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s children* shows the impact of British colony over the country. There is an analogy that both the

works are depicted from the British era till the present day. As the hope of life and positivity is shown in the end of the *Midnight's Children*, as so is shown in Vikram Chandra's novel.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the work gives us a clear picture of the success of the work in context of the magical realism. During the initial years when the term was employed by the Latin American and later it was used by other writers from different countries. It led to specific meaning which became useful for critics in literary sense. The recent magical realist writers however have applied the term chaotically and unfortunately it does not convey clarity about the term. There are certain characteristics of the term employed by the writers but it fails to justify itself on the grounds of this term. Therefore, such analysis of the novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* may take the novel into the category of magical realist texts to represent a clearer picture.

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