

Role of Magical Realism in Indian English Literature : Blending Myth, History and Modernity

RAKESH KUMAR MAHATO

Abstract. Magical realism in Indian English literature is a powerful storytelling technique that blends reality with elements of fantasy, myth, and folklore. It allows authors to portray the complexities of Indian history, culture, and identity while addressing deep-rooted social and political issues. By merging myth and modernity, magical realism serves as a bridge between traditional narratives and contemporary concerns. Indian authors such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have used this technique to depict historical events, social hierarchies, and personal struggles in an imaginative and thought-provoking manner. Their works present supernatural occurrences as part of everyday life, allowing readers to engage with reality in a more layered and symbolic way. Novels like *Midnight's Children*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, and *The God of Small Things* showcase how magical realism creates a hybrid literary space that reflects the diversity and contradictions of Indian society. Through the seamless integration of magical and real elements, these narratives explore themes of cultural hybridity, historical trauma, caste discrimination, gender roles, and the impact of globalization. The use of magical realism in Indian English literature is not just a stylistic choice but a means of preserving India's rich storytelling traditions while engaging with contemporary realities. By incorporating elements of folklore, spirituality, and mythical symbolism, writers create immersive stories that resonate with both Indian and global audiences. This paper argues that magical realism remains an essential literary device that allows Indian authors to navigate and reinterpret their nation's history, cultural diversity, and modern transformation. The study further highlights how this genre continues to evolve, influencing new generations of writers who seek to blend the mystical with the mundane to craft compelling narratives about India's past, present, and future.

Keywords : Magical realism; mythology; history; modernity; postcolonialism; hybridity; identity; social issues.

Magical realism in Indian English literature is a unique and significant literary technique that merges reality with fantastical elements, allowing

authors to create narratives that reflect India's cultural, historical, and social complexities. Originating in Latin America, the genre became a global phenomenon, influencing various literary traditions, including Indian English literature. As Maggie Ann Bowers writes, magical realism "creates a fictional world that closely resembles the one we live in, but which also incorporates fantastic or mythical elements" (Bowers, 2). Indian writers, deeply rooted in their mythological and oral storytelling traditions, found magical realism a suitable medium to express the nation's layered identity. This technique enables authors to challenge traditional storytelling structures, offering alternative perspectives on historical events, colonial legacies, and socio-political struggles. In India, literature has long been intertwined with mythology and folklore, as seen in epics like *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. These narratives, which seamlessly integrate gods, supernatural beings, and magical occurrences into human experiences, create a fertile ground for magical realism to flourish in contemporary literature. As Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora observe, "Magical realism expands the categories of the real so as to encompass myth, magic, and other extraordinary phenomena in Nature or experience" (Zamora and Faris, 6). Indian authors such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy have adopted and adapted this genre to reflect their own cultural landscapes, often using it to address issues of identity, oppression, and historical trauma. Magical realism also serves as a powerful tool for postcolonial discourse, as it allows writers to reinterpret and rewrite history from non-Western perspectives. Homi K. Bhabha explains this as a "space of enunciation," where cultural meanings are produced "in-between" traditional binaries, offering hybrid interpretations of identity and history (Bhabha, 88).

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, for example, uses magical realism to depict India's transition from colonial rule to independence, intertwining personal and national histories through the protagonist's supernatural abilities. As Rushdie notes in the novel, "To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world" (15), highlighting how personal memory and national history are deeply entwined. Similarly, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* employs dreamlike sequences and nonlinear narration to explore caste, gender, and social injustice. The narrative reveals that "things can change in a day" (22), a line that underscores the fragile, often surreal shifts in reality that magical realism enables. These narrative tools demonstrate how magical realism can enhance storytelling by offering symbolic representations of reality. The

integration of magical realism in Indian English literature also highlights the contradictions of contemporary India, where rapid modernization coexists with deep-seated traditions, and where historical wounds continue to shape national consciousness. As Richard Hart explains, magical realism “permits the co-existence of contradictory worlds : the magical and the mundane, the ancient and the modern” (Hart, 45). The genre provides a means for writers to express these tensions creatively, making abstract social and political issues more accessible to readers. Additionally, it allows for the exploration of marginalized voices, as it creates a space where alternative truths and suppressed histories can be articulated. Through the use of magical realism, Indian authors not only continue the legacy of their mythological storytelling heritage but also push the boundaries of literary expression. As globalization influences literature, magical realism remains relevant in contemporary narratives, helping writers craft stories that transcend cultural and temporal limitations.

Magical realism in Indian English literature provides a unique framework for authors to engage with historical narratives while questioning dominant colonial and nationalist discourses. By infusing real-world events with mythical elements, writers reimagine history in a way that challenges conventional historiography. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is a prime example of this technique, where Saleem Sinai’s supernatural powers serve as a metaphor for India’s tumultuous journey from colonial subjugation to independence. As Rushdie writes, “The truth is that memory is a kind of accomplishment... It has its own rules” (34), emphasizing the fluidity of historical narrative through personal recollection. Through Saleem’s telepathic connection with other children born at the stroke of midnight, Rushdie critiques the political and social transformations of post-independence India, revealing the instability of national identity. Similarly, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* blends historical fact with speculative fiction, subverting Western scientific rationality by incorporating indigenous knowledge systems. The novel states, “In moments of crisis, we are sometimes offered exactly the knowledge we need” (112), suggesting a mystical alternative to empirical reasoning. In doing so, magical realism becomes a mode of resistance, allowing Indian writers to present alternative histories that acknowledge the voices of marginalized communities. In addition to historical reinterpretation, magical realism plays a crucial role in exploring themes of identity, hybridity, and displacement in Indian literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* illustrates this by weaving

Indian mythology with diasporic experiences, using the protagonist's magical abilities to mediate between her Indian heritage and her American reality. As Divakaruni puts it, "The spices are my love. I know their origins, and what their colors mean. I talk to them" (56), portraying a character whose cultural identity is literally spoken through mystical tradition. The narrative highlights the struggles of immigrants attempting to balance cultural nostalgia with the pressures of assimilation. This dual existence, often expressed through magical elements, reflects Homi Bhabha's "concept of cultural hybridity", where identity is fluid and shaped by multiple influences. Bhabha notes, "It is in the interstices, the overlap and displacement of domains of difference that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha, 92).

Similarly, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* employs a fragmented narrative structure and surreal imagery to reflect the fractured identities of its protagonists, emphasizing the deep-rooted effects of caste and gender discrimination. Roy observes, "It is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined" (45), using haunting magical motifs to articulate trauma and repression. Through these texts, magical realism offers a way for Indian writers to engage with issues of identity in a rapidly changing world. Magical realism also serves as a lens through which social injustices, gender oppression, and environmental concerns are examined. Writers use the genre's dreamlike logic to expose hidden societal structures and critique existing power hierarchies. For instance, Gitanjali Kolanad's *Girl Made of Gold* combines Tamil folklore with contemporary issues of gender violence, using magical realism to depict the resilience of female characters. The protagonist reflects, "A girl who is born with gold in her body is both blessed and cursed" (78), a statement that encapsulates the double-edged symbolism of feminine power in patriarchal societies. Likewise, the blending of myth and reality in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* reflects the disillusionment of characters caught between economic globalization and local struggles. Desai writes, "Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss?" (134), emphasizing the emotional fallout of rapid modernization. These works demonstrate how magical realism remains a vital narrative strategy for addressing contemporary socio-political issues, providing an imaginative space where suppressed voices and alternate realities can emerge.

Furthermore, the use of magical realism in Indian English literature highlights the intersection of myth and modernity. This blending is particularly evident in works that juxtapose traditional storytelling with contemporary concerns. Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* integrates Indian myths with the lived experiences of modern women, showcasing how folklore continues to shape contemporary realities. In the novel, a character declares, "Myth is not a lie, it is the truth retold" (102), revealing the enduring power of ancient stories. By using magical realism, Hariharan portrays female agency within the constraints of patriarchal structures, offering a reimagined feminist discourse.

Similarly, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* employs mythological references to depict India's freedom struggle, intertwining Gandhian philosophy with a narrative style reminiscent of oral storytelling traditions. Rao affirms, "There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthalapurana, or legendary history, of its own" (88), affirming the importance of indigenous narratives. This synthesis of the old and the new allows Indian authors to preserve traditional storytelling forms while engaging with global literary trends. Magical realism also enables a critique of religious and spiritual practices in Indian society. In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh incorporates supernatural elements to explore the tension between science and spirituality, illustrating how these forces coexist in Indian consciousness. The novel's depiction of the Sundarbans' mystical landscape reinforces the idea that nature itself holds magical properties, reflecting indigenous beliefs and environmental concerns. Similarly, Anosh Irani's *The Parcel* uses elements of magical realism to delve into the lives of transgender individuals in Mumbai, blending spiritual themes with stark social realities. These works demonstrate how magical realism can be a powerful medium for discussing issues of faith, identity, and marginalized communities. As globalization influences Indian English literature, magical realism continues to evolve, incorporating new themes and narrative techniques. Contemporary writers experiment with the genre by integrating digital culture, technological advancements, and dystopian elements into their stories. For example, Samit Basu's *The Simoqin Prophecies* blends fantasy, mythology, and futuristic elements, creating a unique space where traditional magic meets modern speculative fiction. This fusion highlights how magical realism remains a dynamic and adaptive form of storytelling, capable of addressing both historical and futuristic concerns. The genre's ability to transcend time and space makes it particularly relevant in an era of rapid change, where writers seek to redefine reality through imaginative

storytelling. Magical realism in Indian English literature is more than just a stylistic device; it is a means of engaging with India's past, present, and future. By blending myth, history, and modernity, Indian authors create narratives that reflect the complexities of their cultural and social landscapes. Whether through historical revisionism, identity exploration, or critiques of social injustices, magical realism continues to shape the literary traditions of India, offering readers a rich and immersive storytelling experience.

Magical realism in Indian English literature functions as a bridge between myth, history, and modernity, allowing writers to reimagine the past, critique the present, and envision alternative futures. This literary mode is hypothesized to serve three primary functions: first, as a tool for historical revisionism, enabling authors to challenge colonial narratives and assert indigenous perspectives; second, as a mechanism for exploring hybrid identities and cultural displacement, particularly in postcolonial and diasporic contexts; and third, as a means of addressing social injustices, including caste discrimination, gender oppression, and economic disparity. By blending the supernatural with the real, Indian writers create narratives that question dominant power structures while preserving traditional storytelling forms. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that magical realism in Indian English literature evolves with global influences, incorporating contemporary themes such as digital culture, environmental crises, and speculative futures. This study examines how magical realism continues to shape Indian literary traditions by offering a transformative space where myth and reality coexist, ultimately redefining notions of identity, history, and resistance.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to analyze the role of magical realism in Indian English literature, focusing on its intersection with myth, history, and modernity. The research is conducted through a critical analysis of primary texts, including novels by Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, among others. These texts are examined using a close reading approach to identify the ways in which magical realism functions as a narrative technique for revisiting history, shaping cultural identity, and addressing social issues. Additionally, the study incorporates secondary sources such as scholarly articles, critical essays, and theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies, literary criticism, and cultural studies. The works of Homi Bhabha, Maggie Ann Bowers, and Lois

Parkinson Zamora provide essential theoretical insights into magical realism's significance in postcolonial literature. Comparative analysis is also utilized to explore the evolution of magical realism in Indian English literature in relation to global literary traditions. Furthermore, the research applies an interdisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from history, mythology, and socio-political studies to examine how magical realism reflects contemporary realities. The study also considers the impact of globalization and digital culture on the genre's transformation. By synthesizing literary analysis with cultural and historical contexts, this methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Indian writers employ magical realism to critique dominant ideologies and reimagine alternative possibilities.

Magical realism in Indian English literature serves as a powerful narrative technique that bridges myth, history, and modernity, offering a unique way to reinterpret historical events, explore cultural identities, and critique social realities. By blending supernatural elements with everyday life, Indian writers challenge conventional storytelling methods and create narratives that reflect the complexities of Indian society. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* reconstructs India's independence through a fantastical lens, while Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* employs magical realism to expose caste and gender injustices. Similarly, Amitav Ghosh, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Kiran Desai use this literary mode to depict hybrid identities, postcolonial struggles, and the impact of globalization. Furthermore, magical realism allows for the preservation of indigenous storytelling traditions, integrating folklore, mythology, and oral narratives into modern literature. Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* illustrate how ancient myths continue to shape contemporary realities. This blending of past and present reinforces the idea that history is not a fixed construct but a dynamic interplay of perspectives and interpretations. By incorporating fantastical elements into historical retellings, Indian writers provide alternative narratives that challenge colonial and Eurocentric historiography. In addition to historical reinterpretation, magical realism plays a crucial role in addressing contemporary social issues. Writers like Gitanjali Kolanad and Anosh Irani use magical realism to highlight gender oppression, caste discrimination, and economic disparity. Through the interplay of myth and reality, these narratives shed light on marginalized voices, offering a critique of societal norms while envisioning alternative

possibilities. The genre's flexibility also allows for the exploration of environmental concerns, as seen in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, where supernatural elements emphasize the interconnectedness of humans and nature. As Indian English literature continues to evolve, magical realism remains a relevant and adaptable genre. Contemporary authors are experimenting with new themes, incorporating digital culture, speculative fiction, and futuristic narratives into their works. Samit Basu's *The Simoqin Prophecies* exemplifies this shift, "merging mythology with science fiction to create a modern interpretation of magical realism". (145) This demonstrates that the genre is not static but continually reshaped by cultural and technological influences. Ultimately, magical realism in Indian English literature serves as a lens through which writers navigate the complexities of history, identity, and societal transformation. By merging myth with modernity, these narratives challenge dominant ideologies, preserve cultural heritage, and offer new ways of understanding the world. As the genre continues to evolve, it remains a vital tool for storytelling, ensuring that diverse voices and perspectives are represented in the literary landscape.

Rakesh Kumar Mahato

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Government Degree College, Rajgir, Nalanda

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