CHAPTER-III

MAGIC REALISM IN NINA SIBAL’S YATRA

I Introduction:

Nina Sibal was an IFS officer. She has also written a novel entitled Yatra. This novel is reminiscent of Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children with regard to the mode of magic realism. In this chapter Yatra is studied with reference to magic realism. The chapter is divided into four parts. The second part presents the plot of the novel. The third part undertakes the narrative for the study of magic realism. The fourth part concludes by providing a summary of the analysis of Yatra.

Nina Sibal's first novel, Yatra is reminiscent of Rushdie's work in its use of Magic Realism. Rushdie's hero Saleem Sinai in Midnight's Children was endowed with the mysterious gift of entering into the minds of others; finally, his body starts developing cracks when India shows signs of breaking up. Krishna Chahal, the heroine of Yatra is endowed with a magical skin that changes colour in response to India, she is born very fair skinned, but grows darker and darker; like Sinai, her paternity is mysterious - her Greek mother Sonia does not know whether she is the daughter of Paramjit, her Punjabi Sikh husband, or Stavros, her Greek lover. She is conceived in August 1947 - Sinai was born on 15 August.
Yatra also invites comparison with Partap Sharma's Nina Sibal’s Yatra is identical with Suniti’s novels, where the main character, Krishna possesses magical skin which will change its colour in reply to emotion when politics becomes narrative, whether in Khushwant Singh’s classic Train to Pakistan or Nina Sibal’s more recent Yatra, the particularizing of mass phenomena in the suffering of individuals strives to humanize political issues, to protest the gap between the politicians’ manipulation of signs and the people’s need to manage the contradictions behind those signs.

The fiction has no more success than the politicians in resolving India’s problems, and often strains as visibly to achieve narrative closure as candidates strive to reach the Lok Sabha seat they spend so much to win. But like the politicians, the novelists can never quite spring free the protagonists of their narratives from the dialogic—multi-voiced, ongoing, unending—into the apodictic. Life, and certainly life in India, doesn’t allow that. And if Bakhtin is right that the dialogism of the novel takes us into the social laboratory where “ideologemes” are invented, it is no accident that the politicians should suddenly have turned for us into the novelist’s avatar: both are notorious as practitioners of modernity’s master narrative(s).
NINA Sibal's first novel Yatra, published in the mid-'80s, was a cerebral yet emotive account of a woman's journey to selfhood. This vintage feminist fare is also the stuff of her second novel. The Dogs of Justice is written in a confessional first person mode. It is a charged and sensitive account of the traumas of gender and identity. Shahnaz is a beautiful Kashmiri Muslim girl who repudiates the comforts of her ICS family background and gets drawn into the vortex of hardcore terrorist activity because of her love for the enigmatic Aslam Sheikh. Abandoned by her lover, she marries Ranbir Saighal, a handsome and worthy military officer. After a life of comfort, she enters into a dalliance with a cynical bureaucrat. Late in the novel, her husband, discovering them in the act, hangs himself with her sari. The novel ends with ritual breast-beating and a plea for understanding if not forgiveness.

Through this fabric are woven many other stories, the story of the Valley as it is torn asunder by diverse interests, the story of the poetess Habba Khatun, the story of the dispossessed of the Narmada Dam, the story of the Bhopal Gas tragedy. At another level, we have excursions and sightseeing trips into the hearts of hurt and dysfunctional families from Geneva to Cyprus to Jabalpur. There is an unremitting sense of loss about the novel, a sense of numbing grief and uncommunicated silences, which the author tries to bridge through the protagonist's brief and involved moments of total commitment with Aslam Sheikh in Kashmir, and indeed the searing anger that forms the substratum of the book.
The metaphor of Kashmir as a lost homeland, as a dismembered place-in-time, as a symbol of flux and dissociation, is constant throughout the novel. The tumultuous events of her life are quite in contrast to the empty pain that accompanies Shahnaz everywhere. In spite of these intense and heartfelt evocations, I feel that The Dogs of Justice suffers certain specific contradictions as a novel, and for certain specific reasons. There is a dissociation between the emotive and the cerebral, almost as though there were two books competing and colliding in the same spine. One is a novel about Shahnaz, a pale fair girl with hazel eyes and copper coloured curls framing her face, a romanticised and sometimes not entirely convincing characterisation.

And then we have the other novel, a novel about all the tumultuous events of our century, the Second World War, the Partition of our subcontinent, the process of articulation of Third World dilemmas. This is the novel that I wish Sibal had given voice to. But the process of the articulation of feminine identity can de-escalate into a mannered and routine format, and there are so many ideological and propaganda cues inherent in the exercise as to render it sometimes selfdefeating. The gender constraints upon the vision and canvas of women writers continue to perplex and sadden me. The Dogs of Justice is a case in point, where a brilliant and articulate writer with access to a larger world of ideas
deliberately limits herself, not to a miniature or cameo vision or some stylistic device, but to a remembered and persistent parameter of her woman-self.

The internal conflict between the novel of ideas and the novel of emotions runs throughout the book. The recent political history of Kashmir is handled with an evocative ease, but the larger flow of history hinges only upon the subsidiary story of Shahnaz and her obsessive, compulsive love for the rather obnoxious Aslam Sheikh.

This crowded canvas of contemporary India devolves at the slightest provocation into standard apologia for “love fulfilled and love unfulfilled”. It really is time, in Sibal's own words, “to break the chain, jettison the baggage, drop the load of Shahnaz and Habba Khatun, and all the women who loved with their being”. As Byron wrote, “Man's love is of man's life a thing apart/ 'tis a woman's whole existence.” Sibal's elegant and articulate novel suffers from just this syndrome. The struggle to forget and rise above this mannered, obsolescent literary persona to a more compete and androgynous vision will mark the Second Coming of contemporary women's writing.

For a long period the contribution in the field of Indian English Fiction by the Women novelists remained scanty. The deeper emotions and the study of the thought processes going inside a woman in our
society demanded immediate attention. With the emergence of a whole new group of contemporary women writers the long awaited drought was satiated and various unknown aspects of women’s personality were discovered. Apart from dwelling on the issues related to women and society these writers projected altogether a different point of view about life and successfully established their capability in the world literary canvas with full conviction.

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II Plot:

The plot of this novel is woven around its protagonist called Krishana Chahal. She is bestowed with a magical skin which can change colour in response to India. This is demonstrated in the metamorphosis of her complexion from fairskin to darkskin. Her origin is also mysterious.
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III Magic Realism in Yatra:

Magic realism or magical realism is a genre where magic elements are a natural part in an otherwise mundane, realistic environment. (Maggie
and Bowers, 1) Although it is most commonly used as a literary genre, magic realism also applies to film and the visual arts. One example of magic realism occurs when a character in the story continues to be alive beyond the normal length of life and this is subtly depicted by the character being present throughout many generations. On the surface the story has no clear magical attributes and everything is conveyed in a real setting, but such a character breaks the rules of our real world. The author may give precise details of the real world such as the date of birth of a reference character and the army recruitment age, but such facts help to define an age for the fantastic character of the story that would turn out to be an abnormal occurrence like some magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to post-colonialism, with hybridity being a primary feature.

Specifically, magical realism is illustrated in the inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural and Western and indigenous. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing, and change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate.

Nina Sibal's Yatra (The Journey) (1987), it is originally published by British feminist presses. These writers' inscription of space as a
gendered concept within the polarized categories of "home" and "world," provides my point of entry, into the exploration of their novels as representative of a specific post-independence historical moment. A certain "feminism" and a certain "nationalism," corresponding to the gendered spaces of "home" and "world," produce the distinctive postcolonial features of their work.

Literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre, magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a so-called rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites; for instance, it challenges binary oppositions like life and death and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present.

According to Angel Flores, magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, or as he claims, “an amalgamation of realism and fantasy.” The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected to the primeval or magical “native” mentality, which exists in opposition to European rationality. According to Ray Verzasconi, as well as other critics, magical realism is “an expression of the New World reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European
super-civilization, and the irrational elements of a primitive America.”

Gonzalez Echchevarria believes that magical realism offers a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws nor objective reality. However, the fictional world is not separated from reality either.

Some sort of division of private and public spheres seems to have always and universally accompanied the construction of genders, whether, as in classical Tamil poetry, as a division between the spaces of "aham" (inner) and "puram" (outer), corresponding to the polarity love/war; or between leisure and work, as in European eighteenth-century bourgeois society; or between domestic (unpaid) labor and wage labor, or reproduction (child-bearing) and production, as under capitalist social systems. Different kinds of actual (social) values have been attached to each domain, though conceptually the two have often been treated as equal and complementary.

Among women's most common acts of transgression has been the crossing of boundaries from one sphere of activity to the other—historically this has taken the form of cross-dressing, participation in war, celibacy, religious devotion, adulterous love, seizing the "book" (the wise woman, the witch), different kinds of work leading to economic independence, etc. But, as my list suggests, some of these transgressive acts may also be absorbed within the social fabric, and thus become sanctioned acts.
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After Yatra, her first book, Nina Sibal seems to have gone through an ordeal by fire. It has made her shed the unnecessary baggage of too many characters, angles and plots. In The Dogs of Justice, her second novel, she emerges chiselled and definitive. This is basically a love story. Shahnaz is in love with Aslam Sheikh, both Kashmiris involved in militant activity in the pre-1947 days. There is a misunderstanding. She marries instead Captain Ranbir Sahgal of the Indian Army - called upon for help against Pakistani aggression by Maharaja Hari Singh.
Personal anguish forms the theme of the book. Sibal's characters do not yell out their agonies. The tone is muted. All through, Shahnaz sits like a stone goddess of alienation. For Ranbir, she is like "a vacant space between my hands. I longed to grab her from wherever she had fled". Or as Shahnaz says of herself, "Now I'm like an object lesson about how to escape from desire. If it was something of the flesh, many of us could do it." (Nina Sibal, Yatra, 56)

There are several other sharply etched characters. Even sharper social issues carrying one into more contemporary involvements. Shades of personalities one knows merge into real-life events. There's a Medha Patkar somewhere in Amrita Shah and certainly Shabana Azmi in Shalini Bhagat. Sibal speaks through different voices. Shahnaz, Ranbir, Monica, Adil Cossawala, the geologist - almost as a relief from having to identify Shahnaz too positively.

Sibal lets her burn in a passion which "at its deepest and purest can go nowhere, it can never be fulfilled". (Shamala Narayan and M K Naik, 122) It leads Shahnaz to a final betrayal. Yet the book is remarkably free of guilt. There are no judgements. Only feelings. Passion is the thread weaving events into a tapestry of pain. This book is good enough to make you curious about what Sibal wrote earlier - it made me read Yatra - and what she may write next.
The novel is a replica of reality which depicts a complex society woven around understanding the social structure in its intricacy of motifs. The novelists’ comprehension of man’s relationship with society and environment in accordance with changing emotions is prevalent in everyday novel. A novel mostly reflects the contemporary society in its meaning and substance. Anita Singh in her article, “Indian English Novel in the Nineties and After” states: “The literary values of a novel are of ten determined by a conjunction of e. subliminal and synchronous forces, which generate independently of the author, investing the surface story with a deeper social significance” (The Atlantic Literary Review, 59).

The novel encompasses all other literary forms, having no limits concerning style or subject. The colonies of England after getting political independence started cultivating English language for the development of their nations. Indians also hinged on English language as a medium in order to understand administrative policy of the imperial authority. In Indian Writing in English and poetry flourished all other literary forms in the beginning. But fiction arrived at last on the Indian English literary scene dominating all other forms having substantial growth in its content and style. The western novel was concerned with space and human beings’ relationships as the focal point. On the other hand, Indian novel in English began as a colonial encounter, which
described tradition and experiences related to Indian society. In the early period of the Indian English novel, writers mostly concentrated on themes like romantic, sentimental and historical themes, having emulated the eighteenth and the nineteenth century British fiction writers like Daniel Defoe, Fielding and Scott as their models. It is evident that the literary revival started in Bengal at first, but afterwards it appeared in Madras and Bombay presidencies.

If we put this up against the many metaphors of nation as a single cloth – if not a seamless one, then certainly a continuously, harmoniously joined patchwork (an image repeated in Nina Sibal’s novel of north-west India, Yatra)

We can see a deeply entrenched way of thinking about the national space as organic and unified despite internal variation of pattern, and seeing anything else as fragmented, less than whole, inorganic. Post-colonial collapse is founded on a contradiction of Western thought (often working through native elites) trying to create the uniformly woven social space of new states by stitching into them the uneven tensions of different fabrics and threads that of necessity confirm post-colonial spaces as lesser, flawed versions of the European ideal. (Salman Rushdie’s metaphors in Midnight’s Children of the cloth with a hole at its centre and the body cracking up are instances of this textile discourse as it operated in the disastrous cutting and splicing of Bengal into two parts,
greater Hind into India and Pakistan, Pakistan into Pakistan and Bangladesh, India into its component language groups and so on. Amitav Ghosh in The Shadow Lines sees the inevitable end of this unravelling of the national fabric as myriads of balkanised tribes each on its own hill with its own flag.)

To conclude, we can say that the burgeoning presence of Nina Sibal’s Yatra, in India is immensely significant and exciting for anyone to overlook or ignore them. The cognizant readers of the world are finally forced to acknowledge their presence and applaud their talent. The felicitation of these novelists and their international appreciations in the form of awards and various nominations from the literary world further establishes their credibility in the world literature. The escalating response shown by the media and the publication houses has contributed immensely towards their acceptance.

IV Conclusion:

Magic Realism in Yatra – A Study, Yatra has been undertaken for the analysis of magic realism. The analysis has exhibited the instances of magic realism. The depiction of the protagonist, Krishana Chahal is itself an example of magic realism. She has intrinsic capacity of changing the complexion of her skin according to her will and wish. She is born with a fair skin but keeps of changing it into dark when she wants to respond to India. Thus this novel is considered to be a novel of magic realism.
Work Cited:

