CHAPTER-V

MAGIC REALISM IN ANURADHA MARWAH-ROY’S IDOL LOVE

I. Introduction

Anuradha Marwah Roy is another Indian woman novelist. Idol Love is her second novel published in 1999. The chapter is divided into four parts. In the second part, the plot of the novel is given in brief. In part three, the narrative is analysed and the employment of magic realism is highlighted with proper illustration. In part four the study of Idol Love is concluded by providing a summary of the analysis.

Novelist Anuradha Marwah is no stranger to desire and its daemons. If Idol Love, her second novel, was about the suicidal sadness of unrequited love in an India that was becoming vulnerable to seductions of religious zealots, her latest novel Dirty Picture is an unflinching look at soul sickness that underlies sexual exploitation in an increasingly promiscuous society.

Idol Love (1999) by Anuradha Marwah-Roy (b. 1962) presents a chilling picture of an Indian dystopia in the twenty-first century. The Hindutva agenda has been carried to its logical end. Society in “Raminland” is ordered on the precepts of Manu. and women are honoured as “Ardhanginis” (better halves). Careers are open to women if they are willing to give up family life and become “Sadhvis” (female
hermits). The capital Rajdhani (Delhi) has been sanitised, and the lower classes (“Dasas” slaves and religious minorities called “Drohis,” traitors) have to get special passes when they enter it for doing all the menial work. The novelist’s attention to detail in recreating day-to-day life in India makes this dystopia utterly credible the life of a young medical college student. The language throughout the novel is that of the protagonist Bharat, full of Indian campus slang.

Love is essentially unfair in Idol Love, a novel set in the immediate present and the foreseeable future. There is always a lover and a beloved, a worshipper and an image. Sacerdotal relationships span an age, connecting the untidy, festering Delhi of today with a sickly sweet-smelling Rajdhani, the name of the capital in the twenty-first century.

It all begins when Rajni falls desperately in love with a Ghalib-spouting professor who is set up as the leader of the Secularists after the demolition of a Masjid. He makes impassioned speeches and forms a bond with Rajni during anti-communal demonstrations. Their love-story refuses to end even with death, because in Raminland – the India of the future – everything can be preserved over centuries by faith. A tale of rebirths and recycling is conceived by a writer who lives to be a hundred, most of the time locked up in her South Rajdhani flat. It doesn’t help matters that miracles take place outside: idols drink milk in temples, and human beings freeze into images. The media only report tales told by the powerful. So to make sense of the fictional world around her the writer is forced to step out into reality where she finds stranger things.
In the old-new land she only half recognizes, incantations are rising from sacred fires to become storm clouds; the complete Indians, now called Ramins, are further suppressing the dispossessed Drohis; revolutionaries with their links in Ghetto 99 and the followers of Maya are singing Ghalib’s ghazals. Moreover, intrigue hangs heavily in the air as another Rajni’s mother-in-law plots to have the young woman’s body ‘restructured’. As one story whirls into another, the aged writer – never out of her depth – throws herself and her books into the fray, in the bargain taking on three generations of her own family, the image-making industry, and the Sadhoo regime of Raminland

II. Plot:

The plot of *Idol Love* is woven around the theme of unfair love which is dealt with in three parts covering a span of seventy years. The first part depicts the suicide of married woman called Rajini. The second part narrates the love affair with between Rajini and a professor of Urdu literature called Riaz Ratnakar. The last part depicts the future into which Hindutva Ideology ends its logical end. There is a depiction of domestic violence, religious identity, the confluence of politics and religion, the nexus of social circumstances and personal decisions.

Anuradha Marwah-Roy’s *Idol Love* presents a chilling picture of an Indian dystopia in the twenty-first century. This is an intricately crafted story, and marvelously innovative in the use of English to suggest
Indian languages - the author indicates subtle differences between the Hindi spoken by the Dasas and the Urdu of the Drohis without using a single italicized desi word. A novel of ideas, Idol Love is an ambitious risk to take at this moment when fiction by Indian women seems largely to swirl gently around the vicissitudes of quotidian life. It is a modern love story set in contemporary Delhi against the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition and has an interesting twist. Anuradha Marwah Roy’s second novel Idol Love is soaked in the suicidal sadness of unrequited love or alternatively the love of idols in a Hindu state, is shown to be a hypnotist seducing us into false prophecies. Anuradha Marwah-Roy is erudite, has a way with words and compels attention. Khushwant Singh in ‘The Hindustan Times’

The novel addresses the rise of the Hindu Right. The “Ramins”, as she calls them, in a clever conflation of “Brahmins” and a newly reincarnated deity “Poornaramin” rule over the new-old Raminland in an Indian dystopia reminiscent of Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale. Significantly, it is a strategic use of the Bhagwad Gita that is decisive in converting a “no-win situation” into a landslide victory for the Ramins in the general election. The novel’s female protagonist, an English-educated writer who has been working with a secularist coalition, finds herself co-opted and used by the very forces she had been opposing. By the end of the novel, her voice has been completely silenced and her “karma”
defined for her by the state as the “action of dedicating her womb to her race,” her social status based upon her caste and her power to give birth to sons.

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Serious, responsible, yet funny and ironic, that is Anuradha’s writing. A criticism – a false criticism that is levelled all the time against women’s writing, is that it tends to be internal and domestic. I think in that sense Anuradha is not a woman – the larger world is her domain. So that she unites in her writing two kinds of sensibility – one that is intimate and personal, and the other that deals for example with politicised religion and socially disruptive forces.

It is not easy to write about such things, and in a way that will induce people to be concerned about them, but I think she succeeds brilliantly. In Dirty Picture, particularly she has managed to bring all her interests together in a narrative that is both disturbing and persuasive. This is a story that needs to be told, but because of its complexity, it is not an easy story to tell. But Anuradha persisted, and we all owe her a debt of gratitude that she did. This particular incident at least will not be covered by the dust of ages.

While most contemporary feminist writers see no reason to transcend their comfortable urban locations to engage with poverty, male domination and issues that trap middle class women in India’s forgotten,
small dusty towns, Anuradha Marwah presents an unflinching picture of two sisters “who become a victim of their own mindset” in her third novel Dirty Picture (published by India Log and priced at Rs 195).

To weave in fact and fiction, biographical and imaginative elements and structure a story that would hold the readers’ interest could not have been an easy task. There is ambition, desire, politics and much more in this novel about small town India. An interesting read. Well crafted narrative and perfectly moulded incidents make this novel a must read. Blame it on the novel being sufficiently disturbing or on the fact that the lives of the protagonists in the novel could be

She used it well in her first book, she employed 'authority' in her second, and the fact that her own background is very different proves no obstacle at all in fleshing out the characters of Bharti and Reena, two sisters who are exploited in different ways.

In “Dirty Pictures”, the author uses a foundation of solid fact to create her most believable scenario. She also empathises so completely that the most memorable segments comprise the use of stream of consciousness as a literary device to mentally box Bharti in so completely that she is helpless in the face of the circumstances that overwhelm her. Left with no option, fire becomes a way out. Even so, when it happens, it is a shock.
The case itself took place in Ajmer in the early 90s and as a former resident of the town, the author brings alive the ambience so vividly that it is difficult to put the book down. Against your better judgment, you keep hoping that there will be some happy endings. But life takes over!

In a recent telephone conversation, Marwah described her book as certainly very dark, but not desperate. Why not, since there is no halfway happy ending for any of the protagonists, except perhaps Reena, and even for her; it's just the triumph of hard lessons learned and a sort of self-awareness achieved.

Because, she says, the book focuses upon the real, the fact that life is tough, and with the rallying cries of liberalisation, globalisation and change ringing in everyone's ears, it is just going to get tougher. “Mores are changing and the lessons women are expected to learn can be very cruel,” she declares, what could help, in her opinion, is developing greater degrees of self-awareness.

She talked about her own visit to Ajmer when the story broke (exploded), and her first view of one of the victims in a picture published in a local newspaper. It showed her with her eyes blacked out and two men with their hands upon her breasts.

The girl's hair was neatly plaited, which is when, Marwah realised, she was a schoolgirl. One of the victims later committed suicide; others vanished within families, a lot of the newspapers practiced self-
censorship because it was felt the situation should not be exacerbated. But the ending was far from satisfactory, even though the law did step in. Ultimately, private agendas had to be addressed. The book itself is worth a read. And while it may not be one that can be easily re-read, it can be allowed permanent space on one's bookshelf because, after all, it is telling the story of a modern India trying to come to grips with the fact that nobody - and nothing - is ever perfect, whether in towns or cities.

At best, we come to grips with the stresses that unhinge us and ensure that they become part of an urban legend that is recognisable without being terrifying.

To call *Idol Love* a novel of ideas is to overlook its more literary merits; to focus only on its artistic elements is to minimize its insightful examination of an important moment in contemporary Indian history that threatens to dominate all other notions of India. *Idol Love* is Anuradha Marwah-Roy’s (now Anuradha Marwah) second novel and is a sharp dystopia of the consequences of India’s hard turn to Hindu fundamentalism in the 1990s.

The story is in three parts and covers a span of roughly seven decades beginning with the suicide of a married woman named Rajni. The love affair between Rajni and a professor of Urdu literature, Riaz Ratnakar (a specialist in Ghalib), becomes the pattern for other star-
crossed lovers in the novel: a different Rajni and a music teacher (Shyam born as Rashid Ahmad), and the writer of the stories of the lovers and her publisher.

The novel is composed of complex layers of thematic and formal elements. Formally the novel structures itself as a writer’s meditation on the significant people in her life as she constructs their stories from events that force themselves upon her.

Thematically, the novel explores issues of domestic violence, religious identity, the confluence of politics and religion, the nexus of social circumstances and personal decisions, the function of art and more. The sheer ambition of the novel threatens to pull it apart into several directions, and there are certainly some sections that are stronger than others, but the whole manages to cohere without closing off further reflection at the end he first part of the novel could easily be the entire novel of writers such as Anita Desai and Jumpha Lahiri (Desai’s Fasting, Feasting and Lahiri’s short story collection The Interpreter of Maladies both were also published in 1999). Baumgartner’s Bombay (1988) tackles some of the same issues surrounding the nation state and identity but doesn’t touch fundamentalism. To be fair to Desai the destruction of the Babri Masjid was still four years in the future, but the currents of Hindutva fundamentalism were certainly flowing strongly in the 1980s –
the VHP and the RSS along with the Shiv Sena were loudly proclaiming all manner of chauvinistic ideas. I realize I’m lumping together several regional and national strains both within and without the various movements, but my point is that India in the 1980s and 1990s was in a period of great turbulence and many of the answers coming from the right promoted a much more monolithic India. And, yes, the British had constructed a monolithic colonial other Hindu India so that postcolonial reconfigurations are to be expected, but there are a number of paths available and there is no necessity for a monolithic self as a response. The various female versions of Rajni and the lover (Riaz, Om, Shyam) are purposely made multiple, I believe, partly in response to the narrowing of circumstance and identity through an appeal to religious fundamentalism.

The first Rajni comes to the un-named writer character in the novel through her friend, Anita, who is concerned that her husband, Riaz, may have contributed to Rajni’s suicide. Anita works in Atlanta as a computer programmer while Riaz teaches Urdu language and literature in Ajmer and they shuttle back and forth as their schedules allow. Their modern marriage is contrasted starkly to the more traditional marriages of both Rajni and the writer. The relationships could form a continuum of traditional to modern with Anita’s at one end and Rajni’s at the other; although all the marriages are unhappy in their own ways, Rajni’s is the
most distressingly so. She is trapped in a loveless marriage and her value is defined entirely in terms of the male children she can produce. She has three daughters, a drunk for a husband, and a mother-in-law who has climbed the traditional family’s power structure quite successfully herself and is now committed to making Rajni pay her dues fully in order to gain any recognition. Through pursuing a higher degree in history Rajni clears a little space for herself but further alienates her family. Researching Gahlib’s response, Rajni comes across Riaz Ratnakar whose bicultural name reflects his mixed Hindu/Muslim family roots. The character of Riaz will become Shyam in the part of the novel which is set in 2062 and will serve to reflect both the forced erasure of history and an attempt to recover it. Marwah sets out the competing tensions and historical parallels deftly and with some arresting images which is fitting since a fair bit of the concern of the novel is with the process of the reification of the self.

The love affair produces a rape (not by Riaz), abandonment, an unwanted pregnancy, and finally Rajni’s suicide.

III. Magic Reaism in Idol Love:

Two historical events propel the novel’s present and set in play its future: the destruction of the Babri Masjid (1992) from the purported birthplace of Ram in Ayodhya; the ‘miracle’ of the statues of Indian
deities ‘drinking’ milk (1995). In the novel, the fundamentalists and Hindu chauvinists are able to use the former to raze the area of Muslims and begin their virtual disenfranchisement, and the latter to consolidate political power by resting sovereignty not in the people but in religion.

The last part of the novel takes us into a future in which Hindutva ideology has refashioned Indian society into a tripartite structure with Ramins at the top, Dasas in the middle, and Drohis at the bottom. The Ramins, have through the political party of the Sadhoos have taken the old notion of Brahmin superiority and combined it with the religious ideology that has turned Ram into Poornaramin who is now seen as the original singular God who became the trinity. Their future India is a nostalgic return to the legislative framework of Manu supported by contemporary technology. In this future the upper caste men and women have recourse to all manner of surgical and assistive reproductive technologies to turn them into the long-limbed, peaches-and-cream-skinned, almost ephemeral beings of fundamentalist imaginary. The women are forced to select one of two roles: the ardhangini or the sadhvi; that is, the Victorian Madonna/whore/manager of the household or the professional business woman with no other desires.

The Dasas are comprised of all the other darker laboring castes and allowed to be servants to the Ramins. The most inferior group is the
Drohis (traitors) and these are all those who are considered unassimilable and form the exotic other of the Ramins. The Drohis are composed almost entirely of Muslims who are “encouraged” to take on Hindu names. The ghettoized Drohis are forced to live in apartheid like conditions with passes required to visit and work in Rajdhani (Delhi’s new name). Upward mobility for the Drohis consists in becoming sanskritized enough to be inoffensive to the Ramins. And, of course, in such a stratified society the most exciting taboo is love across caste-class lines. The Rajni of this future has a caring husband, and she is clearly an investment; however, she is not measuring up, not socially, not physically, and not emotionally. Into her life comes the Drohi music teacher Shyam as her Ustad Sahib. Shyam immediately realizes the Bollywood film script that Rajni is following.

Earlier, I mentioned Desai and Lahiri, but the most significant comparison to Marwar’s novel is Margaret Atwood’s dystopic novel The Handmaid’s Tale in which a fundamentalist Christian patriarchy has taken over large parts of North America. Unlike Atwood’s future, Marwar’s completely encloses its inhabitants; there is no outside except sponsored emigration but the sense is that the rest of the world functions with much the same structure. The novel does end with two small signs of resistance and hope: the writer’s ability to create alternative endings for the latest incarnation of Rajni, and the figure of Maya.
Marwah does provide a reasonable framework for understanding Maya’s motivations, but she is ideologically transparent. It is Maya who serves, ironically, to tear away the veils of consumerism and patriarchal domination from her fellow slum dwellers. One would expect more characters in a novel so rich with ideas to be one dimensional, but the main characters are rounded and complex. It is a testament to Marwah’s skill that in Idol Love we get fully realized characters who wrestle valiantly and sometimes blindly to keep their futures open in an India that is becoming more and more closed.

IV. Conclusion:

Magic Realism in Idol Love – A Study, Idol Love has been taken up for study and the study has shown that this novel covers the past, present and the future. It reminds one of H.G. Well’s The Time Machine. The study exhibits the instance of magic realism in the portrayal of Indian dystopia. This plot is about the love of Rajini Riyaz ratnakar who are already dead. There is also the depiction of rebirth of Rajini and Riyaz. The day to day life of India has been recreated in the mode of fantasy. Therefore this is a novel of magic realism.

‘Idol Love’ shows that Love is essentially unfair. It depicts the love of Rajini with a professor. He is involved in politics by being the leader of the securalists after the demolition of masjid. This is a great Orator with impassioned speeches and develops a bond with Rajni during his anti communal demonstrations. They however die in the subsequent
years. The employment of magic realism is observed in the portrayal of their love story continuing even after their death. It is so because in Ramin land every thing can be preserved by faith. There are portrayal’s of rebirths and recycling which or characterized by magic realism. It is portrayed that Rajini in her rebirth recognizes only half of the things and the presence which occurred in her earlier birth. There is also a ting of magic realism in the depiction of incarnation as rising from sacred fires which is subsequently take the form of storm clouds. There is also a sub-plot of Rajini’s mother-in-law in which magic realism is noticeable. In this regard there is a portrayal of a recreation of a young women’s body another instance of magic realism is found in the very range of the narrative which covers the life of several births.
References: