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Magical Realism in Yann Martel's "*Life of Pi*" and Easterine Kire's "*When the River Sleeps*": A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Magical realism also known as marvelous realism is a literary genre which is set up in the real world mixed with fantasies and supernatural elements. Stories are set up in typical settings and known places in which unbelievable and unrealistic events are presented as normal by the characters in the story. It is a blend of folklore, fiction, mythology and superstition. This study is about the comparative study of two novels, *Life of Pi* and *When the River Sleeps* which is based on magical realism and character development of the main characters. This work will be a study of spiritual growth and how certain beliefs change their life in the long run. Also focuses on the traditional and cultural significance and how it shapes one's direction of life. *Life of Pi* being a story from the southern part of India and *When the River Sleeps* from the northern part as a comparison shows the unity in diversity. How a large part of nature can be a turning point for the main characters like the ocean for Pi and the forest for Vilie. Nature works in mysterious ways as it has worked for them as a way of clarity and understanding of life.

Keywords: Magical realism, spirituality, character growth, journey, destination, realization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Magical realism is a kind of fiction and art form that shows the reality of life blended in with imagination. This term was first used by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe certain types of paintings and later on used for describing many other works which has then become one of the popular genres all over the world.

While fictional stories are mostly based on a fictional land, magical realism is a type of genre where fictional and mythical characters are brought out in the real world, making it a normal occurrence in the story. Many stories and novels have been based on magical realism, some of the famous works are “*One Hundred Years of Solitude*”, “*The Metamorphosis*”, “*Like Water for Chocolate*” etc. In an article by Luis Leal named “*Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature*” he states that “Magical realism is not magic literature either. Its aim, unlike magic, is to express emotions, not to evoke them”.

This work circles around two literary novels that have magical realism as the main theme. The first one is “*Life of Pi*”, it is a Canadian philosophical novel by Yann Martel. This story is about a young boy named Piscine Molitor Patel who explores the issues of spirituality and metamorphosis at a very young age. Pi grew up as the son of a zoo manager in Pondicherry. At a very young age he started exploring spirituality, being brought up as a vegetarian and following Hinduism, he later investigated Christianity and Islam and decided to become adherent to all three religions against the will of his parents. In February 1976 after “The Emergency” was declared by Indira Gandhi. Pi’s father decides to sell the zoo and immigrate with his wife and family to Canada. A few days out of port from Manila they encountered a storm and sank. Pi managed to escape in a life boat stuck in the ocean for 227 days after a shipwreck along with a tiger named Richard Parker, an orangutan named Orange Juice, a spotted hyena, Grant’s Zebra and other animals from the zoo. After the hyena killed the zebra and orangutan, much to his surprise found Richard Parker while it killed the hyena. All those days both of them encountered many incidents making Pi believe that Richard Parker had a bond but after several ups and downs they were finally washed out on the shores of Mexico, where Richard Parker disappears into the nearby jungle without looking back leaving Pi heartbroken. This novel ends with a conversation between Pi and two officials from the Japanese ministry of transport who were conducting the shipwreck. Pi makes them choose between the story with animals or the one with humans, and eventually the officials chose the one with animals.

The other novel is “*When the River Sleeps*” by Easterine Kire which narrates about Vilie, a hunter who made the forest his home. He has been woken up continuously by dreams of a certain river which a seer had mentioned to him. This river has a stone which will give immense power when obtained when the river is still. After certain consideration Vilie decides to embark on the journey to get the stone from the still river. The journey seems to be surreal as he travels through the hills surrounded by supernatural activities such as weretigers, widow-spirits and demons who are also in the quest to obtain the heart- stone. While travelling he gets in contact with the nearby villagers just for a stay, some seem to be very kind to him while some others are just ruthless and accuse him of a murder he witnessed. After a lot of trial and tribulations he finally obtains the heart- stone. On his way home he meets a kind woman named Ate who has magical powers and can bring curse upon anyone.

Believing that Ate was harmless and seeing the emptied village, Vilie decides to bring her home because he knows that the village is not safe and takes her to his ancestral

village and makes her stay with his aunts and gives her the heart- stone, by which she lives a happy life. When Vilie went back to his forest home he was brutally murdered for the heart- stone. The later on married Ate visits his home occasionally and claims to feel his presence.

The Spiritual Belief

Both the stories have a spiritual belief on their own levels. In “*Life of Pi*” we see that Pi being a vegetarian coming from an orthodox Hindu family explores different other religions and highlights the power of faith and hope even in the darkest hours in a place where all hope is lost. Pi explains how his life has been gloomy after the tragic incident but his academic studies and spiritual development have given him the strength and confidence to overcome the sadness and lead a peaceful life. He says that “I know zoos are no longer in people’s graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both.” While he got his love of animals from his father and love for God from his mother, we see that spirituality has always been in his blood and that is why Pi always compares even the simplest things with God, spirituality and animals. Pi always wanted to be on the side of faith, an unknown power that gives him hope and peace. When Pi started to learn about Christianity he understood that they believe in one God and His son Jesus Christ who gave His life for the common people and have only one story to live by over and over again which is more than and enough for them. As a young boy this story was astonishing for him. He also explored Islam, first he was not sure about the religion but slowly after listening to Imam his perspective was totally changed and he started to live into every religion believing all religions are the same and gives the same amount of peace and comfort.

In the novel *When the River Sleeps*, we see that the sleeping river mentioned in the novel is said to be a symbolic depiction to Vilie himself because just like him the river too lies in a state of absorption. Here we can see that spirituality is blended with the real world and is in a constant state of blurriness between the physical and spiritual realm. Vilie’s journey to find the heart- stone can be seen as a spiritual quest formed by a dream and the want to have a connection with something that is beyond reach. This story reveals the supernatural belief in spirits by the Naga people. Most of the Christians were settled in the forest of Nagaland and had some practices that lead to certain supernatural beliefs. One of the supernatural beliefs is that there is an unclean forest where people are warned not to go since the spirit children would take the human children to play with. When Vilie reaches the river territory, he and Kani are met with absolute silence and saw a spirit widow woman who must be guiding the river singing a funeral song and as soon as she disappears the river goes to sleep which itself signifies the supernatural belief of the people.

This novel shows spiritual belief more in nature and superstitions, rather than religion. The main spiritual elements that can be seen here are the seers, heart- stone and other forest spirits.

The Journey

The journey in both the novels are similar. One is about the journey through the ocean and the other through the forest. Both being the home of the main characters for a certain point of time. In "*Life of Pi*" we can see that in those 277 days he was mentally and physically drained; he even reached a point where he went blind and was almost killed. The journey made Pi's faith in religion even more stronger. This story also reflects on his journey in religion, his life in India and the days at the ocean. He was inspired by his father and being an animal lover he learned more about animals and also studied animal psychology. Pi's life transitioned from being an innocent young boy who had not met the harshness side of life to a point of life where he had to lose his values to survive and overcome the difficult situations. The ocean can be seen as a metaphor of life that is in a continuous fluid state where humans and animals strive to survive. It shows that every life has a curious time, a suffering time and a time of understanding and of peace. Martel shows the connection between the eastern and western traditions mingled in a way that everyone can relate to it. It can also be seen that throughout the journey Pi has no other way but to rely on theoretical observation and studies to tame the lion. Pi slowly develops a zoomorphic behaviour to tame the lion by interpreting the lion's roar and ultimately becoming the alpha animal. Through this journey we can see that Pi's faith had been put to test through tribulations and how he was forced to adapt to such a hostile environment.

In the novel "*When the River Sleeps*" we see that Vilie goes through a lot of emotions and tribulations to get the heart- stone. His journey through the forest of Nagaland shows the richness of vegetation, adventurous hills, enchanted villages etc., where he met people who helped him; he also came across many spiritual beings who tried to stop him from getting the stone but Vilie's only aim after his beloved's death was to get to the sleeping river that has been lingering for a long time in his dreams. Kire brings the reader's attention towards the traditional and superstitious belief of the people of Nagaland filled with weretigers, witches and magical powers. The forest represented here is not just a background but it is a living entity which is both beautiful and dangerous at the same time. This journey is not just about getting the heart stone to attain magical powers but a journey to find a deeper understanding of life itself. Vilie not only encounters danger from humans but also from supernatural beings, he had to overcome forest demons, unpeaceful spirits, widow spirits etc., and had to go through the unclean forest despite everyone's warning. Kire explains that nature is the ultimate healer, this explanations can be seen in instances like whenever Vilie was hurt or comes through a fever, he gets wild leaves that would heal his open wounds or reach out to the seers to get herbal medicine with a belief that nature can heal anything.

Vilie's journey also symbolises the journey into the inner mind, it shows how complicated it gets to understand oneself and leaving his native village and comfort to dwell in the forest shows how he has been starting to understand himself and his stand in this world.

The Destination

In “*Life of Pi*” when Pi finally reaches the shores of Mexico and was rescued, he thought Richard Parker would be with him but as Richard Parker disappeared into the jungle without looking back it broke his heart and he was not able to believe that Richard Parker didn't even turn back. We see that later on in life, Pi has come to a state of being at peace with himself and holding onto the faith that had always been with him in hard times. Martel shows how certain episodes in life lead to a turning point that brings out a new kind of person. From being a curious young kid to being a matured person strengthening himself in religion and faith. Even during the conversation with the agents his way of seeing life and the way he explained the story seemed to be in a very mature and confident way. He explains his life experience to the insurance agents in two versions : one with the animals and one with humans, making them choose between miracle and facts, in which eventually they believe the story with the animals since it is more beautiful and believable and the story with the humans is just vile and brutal but Pi states that whichever story they believe doesn't matter because he has now lost his family either way.

In “*When the River Sleeps*” we come to know that Vilie's destination was not just obtaining the heart- stone but understanding himself and his role in this world. He understands that worldly riches give him no peace but kindness and hope does, but unfortunately he gets killed. Even though he is dead we see that the purpose of the magic stone serves its purpose when it has been passed to Ate ultimately finding a new life and purpose with Vilie's family. The destination also reveals that the true power of the heart- stone is not worldly riches but to gain spiritual knowledge and understanding. There are also elements of longing, courage to face life through the rough paths. This story shows how materialistic greed can lead one to death and how spiritual growth can uplift life. Vilie himself realises the change that has occurred in him, he understands that he is not the same person when he started the journey, everything he encountered made him believe that worldly pleasures will not give him the peace he needed. The journey gave him wisdom and spiritual growth which made him sacrifice the heart- stone for the wellbeing of another.

Similarities and Differences

Both the stories have certain similarities and differences. The similarities are the journey - where both of them had to reach a destination to come out of the tribulation they were in, the spiritual belief - because both of them believed in a power beyond them and had full faith in it, the willpower - because both of them didn't give up even when the situation was too hard to handle but the courage and faith held them up.

Both were not the same person when the journey started, they have gained more knowledge and understanding. The magical realism in both the stories bring out the same meaning on how hard life can be. All one has to do is to never lose faith. A

beautiful message that can be seen in both the stories is that life can be and will be difficult. But having faith in oneself and having spiritual faith can help overcome any obstacle in life. Both stories show how magical realism has played a vital role in bringing out the beautiful message.

The differences are the path, Pi had to travel through the ocean while Vilie through the thick forest both at the extreme of opposites. While Pi had to fight for food and keep distance with the tiger and keep his mind sane, Vilie had to go through dangerous forest fighting off spirits, weretigers and getting himself cured from multiple injuries. Vilie died just while he was living a peaceful life, but Pi found his peace and continued a transformed life. "*Life of Pi*" relies on faith and educational growth while "*When the River Sleeps*" relies on dreams and determination.

II. CONCLUSION

A fictional work is entirely removed from reality, but fiction in reality is used in order to make a valid point. Magical realism relies mostly on reality because certain magical points are taken from real life to make it more acceptable and relatable. Unlike fiction, magical realism is limited only within reality and anything further and beyond doesn't come under magical realism. When magical realism is brought out in a story it mostly gives out life lessons or shows us a better view of life on how beautiful and threatening life can be. Both the novels show how maintaining strong convictions even in life's most threatening moments can save oneself. The central theme found in both the novels is that we live and breathe through hope and belief. Without hope and belief there would be nothing worth fighting for.

Spirituality connected with religion and spirituality connected with nature is the main theme that has been brought out in both the novels. While Kire beautifully weaves a tapestry of the physical and spiritual world bringing out a beautiful pattern of happiness, Martel also creates a beautiful imaginative form of humans and their nature in dire circumstances. Magical realism has been brought out in a way that is fictional but relatable which gives a purpose or meaning of life. Martel's "*Life of Pi*" won the Bookers Prize in 2002 and was published in more than 30 languages. Kire's "*When the River Sleeps*" also won the Hindu Literary Prize for Fiction in 2015.

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