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**Imaginations of the Real: The Tropes of Magic Realism in Sidhhartha Gigoo's *The  
Lion of Kashmir***

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**Abstract**

The impetus of this research paper is, thus, to explore how magic realism is used as a useful narrative device for expressing views that oppose the dominant commonplace practices of thinking, while grasping the paradox of the coalition of the opposites. The aim is to read Sidhhartha Gigoo's novel, *The Lion of Kashmir*, as a magic realist text and to examine how through that literary mode, it articulates an alternative history of a derelict paradise and its people's fragmented existence, the conflicting identities, ideologies, orientations, and affiliations. Magical realism is a mode suited to exploring... and transgressing... boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction (Zamora and Faris, 5-6).

**Keywords:** Magic Realism, Narrative, Identity, History

As a style of fiction, magic realism is an exceptionally extensive field, with intricate structures both overlapping and dismantling, engaging and insulating, coarse and indefinite, particularly in view of the variety of cultures, including the obvious Latin American, Caribbean and Indian, which have made use of it for a variety of ends, be it resistance, subversion or manifesting multiculturalism. There are many features and elements that are often combined to create this literary technique, such as intertextuality, metatextuality, distortion and jumbling up of time and space, introduction of the realm of the subconscious and bifurcation of the plot. Magic realism has been primarily understood as a battle between the opposites—the real and the magical — between the binaries, resulting in “a syncretism between paradoxical dimensions of life and death, historical reality and magic...” (Cooper, 32). But at the same time, it “provides a fictional ground in which to imagine alternative narrative visions of agency and history” (Faris, 44). Thus, magic realism becomes characteristically discursive and diverse while encapsulating reality in substitutive ways and from varied perspectives, the known and



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the enigmatic, the visible and the intrinsic, the apparent and the inherent, the rational and the irrational.

The impetus of this research paper is, thus, to explore how magic realism is used as a useful narrative device for expressing views that oppose the dominant commonplace practices of thinking, while grasping the paradox of the coalition of the opposites. The aim is to read Sidhhartha Gigoo's novel, *The Lion of Kashmir* (2020), as a magic realist text and to examine how through that literary mode, it articulates an alternative history of a derelict paradise and its people's fragmented existence, the conflicting identities, ideologies, orientations, and affiliations. Kashmir, since India's Independence, has been a disputed territory, incessantly dealing with the-Occupier-and-the-Occupied binary, where every fabrication turns into a fact and the real becomes fictional. Kashmir's conflict has permeated deep into the psyches of its own people, leaving perforated identities behind in a state of abashment and the ordinary minds struggling to find meaning of their troubled existence under warped conditions and holding on to the vestiges of their crumbled sanity. *The Lion of Kashmir*, a winding labyrinth of human mindscape, explores this convoluted life in Kashmir, where the personal is certainly overlapping the political and the political overpowers the fringes on which the personal feelings and sensibilities are pinned up. The novel is about a daughter's journey not only back home—Kashmir—to find her missing father, but also a journey towards understanding her relationship with her "home" and her father. It is a portrayal of the inner psychosomatic processes of the narrator-protagonist, Zooni, who returns to Kashmir from her more secure life in London to look for her father, Abdul Aziz, a Commandant in Special Forces. In the process, as the internal rhythms of thought and experience are unravelled, the novel fortifies that what is believed to be a homogenous reality has a much infused contrasting shadow of it, especially when it comes to Kashmir loaded with splinters, prevalent split-ends, and not-so-chartered contours across.

Just as any other narrative of Kashmir, the novel has many layers, dimensions and wayward strands, making a comprehensive, straight interpretation difficult to work out. Thus, magic realism becomes an apt literary tool to make the reader aware and to underscore that the category of real is not definite and hence all presumptions are put on stake. The novel invites the reader to look beyond the limits of the perceivable, offering



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a possibility of multiple truths to exist simultaneously in the context of Kashmir, much as they can exist in rampant real life situations as such. In fact, the very setting of the shadow boundaries—"Penumbra" and "Umbra"—as the names for the first two sections, while the third is simply titled as "The Journal of Abdul Aziz", hints at the prosaic acceptance of incomprehensibility of what perhaps exists beyond the physical.

While Franz Roh, a German art critic, has stated that magic realism as an art category offers a way of representing and responding to reality and depicting enigmas of life, Kumkum Sangri (1987) proposes that the magical realist rages an attack on the dominant culture of regularities and its authoritative version of the truth actually provides a new and more "comprehensive mode of referentiality" (163), meaning that it provides a new way of comprehending categories without having to rely on absolute truth or fixed definitions. Therefore, it breaks down the idea of absolute truth and undermines a single, specific account of a reality.

The scapes of Kashmir alter in consonance with the events of history, be it religious, social, cultural or political. Gigoo situates the novel in a particular context: "A half-torn poster 'Lion of the Desert' is pasted on the wall... they might think it is still 1985... 'There is bloodbath in the city... They torched the shrine at Khankah'... *Who is they?*" (59) and "I first met Salim Dar in the summer of 1990" (172). This background, while offering a frame to the novel, underscores two elements that remain generally consistent through the narrative: one, the concept of time is completely dislodged and warped and second, the narrator is glaringly unreliable. The poster of 'Lion of the Desert' refers to the 1981 film Libyan historical epic war film, which came to the Regal Cinema in Srinagar in 1985. However, the Khankah Shrine in the Old city got burnt in 2017, and was not torched. Both the references have deeper connotations much to the point of an obscure correlation with the creation a world beyond ordinary, mundane reality. The Libyan film was the story of tribal leader Omar Mukhtar who fought the Italian Royal Army and its General Rodolfo Graziani to resist their rule and was hanged in the end. The film, on its release in the Valley that year, enthused the Kashmiri youth to rebel against the Indian State. But it wasn't that year, or it was — "if any outsider were to look at it they might think it is still 1985" (Gigoo, 59). However, the subsequent reality of rigged elections two years later proved a strong nudge to bring back the Libyan film to the streets of Kashmir and in 1989-90, on the one hand the armed



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insurgency erupted and on the other hand, the exodus of Pandits took place. The reference to Khanqah-e-Molla or Shah-e-Hamdan, which is one of the oldest Muslim shrines known for its Sufi symbolism and Kashmiri architecture, once again tosses up the element of temporality. Originally built in 1395 and later reconstructed in 1732, the shrine has had a religious-cultural past and present of its own. The ambiguity about time and the mix-up of facts hint at a clear-cut tension between the real and the imaginary worlds of the novel.

Time-travel as such is not essentially magic realism, but it could be so when worked in a manner that is somewhat unreal or magical, though not a fantasy through and through. Time, in a magic realist novel, tends to be fluid, not linear or not moving in a particular direction and the misrepresentation of facts and the fallibility on the part of the narrator further accentuates “the seamless quality of this mode, the difficulty of distinguishing between fact and invention, brings an enormous pressure to bear upon the perception of reality” (Sangri, 162). The symbolism of time acquires greater significance in the novel, “I look at the clock on the wall. Someone is trapped in it... The dial changes its appearance. ... The clock is about to explode and there’s no sign of Time” (Gigoo, 5-6). There is peculiarity in the representation of time — time-shifts, flashbacks, flash-forwards, random reconnections, contorted reconciliations for the magic realist approach to time and temporality shows that no ground rules really exist. The magic element becomes omnipresent, in majority of the instances connected to the undermining of the empirical time. Time as an absolute category is much subverted through the novel. As the narrative oscillates between the past and the present, an engaging corollary drawn is the idea of time in relation to memory, highlighting how past, present and future resist definitive distinctions, all three existing simultaneously in the making of memories and remembering, in dreams and hallucinations, in recollections and projections.

Zooni feels the need to “assess the present” and “hold someone responsible for everything” but the “only way forward is going backwards”, but she must navigate through the past to make sense of the present. Her journey towards finding her missing father, more than a physical passage, is the recollection of her past, reflecting the complexities of her relationships with her father and her home: Zooni had gone camping in the woods with her father and subsequently not only does she realize that



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Aziz is an “ace hunter” but that she also has a knack for killing birds (Gigoo, 55-56). She recollects how Aziz became the “Lion of Kashmir” for preferring to save a village boy from drowning before reaching his daughter (Gigoo, 57), the memory of the birth of her brother, Zubair, in the hospital and then that of her father being carried to the hospital after a mob attacked him, and much later reading the diary of Aziz about his and his associate Uncle Dar’s past. The novel reiterates the idea that the present is indeed a confluence of perception and recollection. Even the past, which is often referred to as memory, is wedged between the present that it was and the existing present to which it is now past. Usually, as Henri Bergson, argues, “the past never is of the same kind of quality since it always actualizes itself into new pasts out of new present perceptions and internal mixtures among and inside the various planes of memory”. Furthermore, Gilles Deleuze states in his study and his use of Bergson’s theory, that the past will always have an effect on the unfolding of the present and, moreover, the present must already be a past when it is present, as it otherwise would not pass into the past:

How would a new present come about if the old present did not pass at the same time that it is present? How would any present whatsoever pass, if it were not past *at the same time* as present? ...The past is 'contemporaneous' with the present that it has been. If the past had to wait in order to be no longer, if it was not immediately and now that it had passed, 'past in general', it could never become what it is, it would never be *that* past (Deleuze, 58-59).

This follows Bergson’s interpretation of the phenomenon of *memoir par excellence*, whereby the involuntary memory, unlike the voluntary memory, “stores up past by the mere necessity of its own nature” (Deleuze, 78). It is through this kind of memory that Gigoo conveys a sense of reality that is both vital and dynamic. It is, in fact, in *memoire involuntaire* that one can witness a perfect juxtaposition of the past and the present. The novel negates the linearity in an attempt to replicate the constant accumulation and reinvention of memory.

The magic realist mode has been used not only to interrogate the “tenuous fissure between past and present that constitutes memory” (Huyssen, 3) but also to address





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future, often endowed with certain characteristics of such pastness. Moreover, the literary tool allows a scope for the recovery of hidden texts and in the process of recovery and validation of suppressed stories, magic realism typically privileges memory over history, often juxtaposing the two. However, there is a lived time as part of daily existence, and then the time of memory and there is also a time of our conscious mind, which is often at odds with the conscious mind, and this is the time of dreaming, delusions or hallucinations. At any given point, an individual has the capacity to function at the juncture of these multiple temporal modes. In *The Lion of Kashmir*, these interfaces of the forms of experiences within the subconscious become just another domain of reality that can be entered into as naturally as the actual world in which the character exists.

The novel opens with a prologue—a dream sequence where Zooni plots to kill her brother, Zubair, by throwing him into the river on the pretext of teaching him to swim. It sets the pitch of the novel: exploring the reality through the surreal, as Zooni says, “Your dreams can’t compare with mine. If our dreams were to compete, I would win every time because my grandma was always the champ. I have inherited the dreams she didn’t dream....She is now making me dream her unfinished dreams.” (3-4) Bringing forth Jorge Luis Borges’s idea of how the mind constitutes for a different realm, be it that of memory, hallucination, illusion or dreams, in which an individual can shape, share and confide their inner thoughts, Gigoo seems to reiterate that the past, present and future, the conscious and the subconscious must not be understood as exclusive, isolated terrains, for their interlinks and interdependence cannot be ruled out when the spatial canvas shifts.

However, the laws of logic do not govern the realm of the subconscious as it does in case of our waking thoughts in a worldly setting. It is witnessed that the categories of time and space stand negated, thus formulating an unreal series of experience, as Gerald Gaylard (1999) calls it the “nowhere land” presented as a “labyrinth or ‘bush of ghosts’”, and offering a more appropriate picture of the mind full of undercurrents. Although they do not fall particularly into the category of dreams and are rather correspond to the Hanna Segal’s (1991) model of “phantasy”. This is specifically true when placing “phantasy” within the mode of magical realism. An important aspect of these modes of “phantasy” is that they establish a connection between the real world



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of the known and the otherwise intangible. As part of workings of Zooni's consciousness, random images are conjured up which are part real part imaginary:

A woman standing next to me is looking at me with mischief in her eyes... Her nose is flat... Somehow, she gives an impression of not being a stranger here... She seems to have come out of nowhere just to make me aware of something... In the sky float small reflections of people familiar and unfamiliar. One such face is of the flat-nosed girl looking intently at me with a strange expression and a desire to make me remember her” (4-5)

Zooni comes across the flat-nosed girl later again in the safe-house where she awaits Uncle Dar, her Dad's subordinate, to come for her and Zubair. Flatnose—“Call me Muknas” (Gigoo, 116)—appears in varied guises, first she is the rustic girl who saves the new-born calf, then she is a shadowy figure at the window of the house but soon disappears, and then again in the house, next to Zooni.

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Flatnose is next to me, moaning and laughing at the same time...

*Look at what you have done, Flatnose. You have mistaken me for yourself...*

Casting a pitiful look at me, she says, ‘You have become me. Haven't you?’ ... (Gigoo, 121-122)

The strange and the improbable becomes the natural subject matter of Zooni's reality and the subconscious, as a magic realist technique, encourages and facilitates exploration of what lies beyond the visible reality. There are no distinct boundaries between the real world and delusionary world. It is through the interface of these two girls that Gigoo renders into language some of the nuances of moods and existence amidst conflict, the countless fleeting shades of meaning and deep resounding echoes in order to capture the sentiment in its tainted essence.

The writer here seems to suggest that the surface of a particular culture or society is a facade, disguising certain hidden truths, which require a more in-depth examination, in order to fully understand the background workings behind that society, or an



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individual's reality. The magical elements or incidents presented in these novels are not the result of thought experiment, but the manifestation of the reality of Zooni who believes or experiences those magical elements or events. "Flatnose thinks I cannot tell dream from reality, truth from falsehood, and clarity from chaos... She is doing her best to show me things that don't exist and never will" (Gigoo, 138). Identities blur; who is saving whom? The next morning's newspaper reports the killing of Salim Dar by the militants and his daughter's suicide: "Uncle Dar's daughter, whom I'd spent the night with and whom I called flatnose, is smiling and happy. I never got to know her real name (Gigoo, 164)." The border between wakefulness and sleep, dreams and reality, calls into question the degree to which liminality actually exists, persuading the reader to question the very credibility of one's own existence.

Zooni and Flatnose, no matter how chaotic their narrative is, once again manifest the incomplete nature of discovering and comprehending life, particularly in a conflict zone. At times, situations and individuals seem to be subjected to micro analysis by the narrator and at others it is nothing more than a case of superficial observation and lack of keenness that comes in play. The recurrence of Flatnose in Zooni's mindspace indicates Zooni's focus on her, but ironically not even being aware of what her name is, testifies an apparent unfamiliarity towards Flatnose. Even the reader begins to wonder if Flatnose was real or a construct of Zooni's hallucination: "When I think of Flatnose, I think of a life gone waste. She could have come out of her delusions and made a difference to the lives...Her tenacious intimacy towards me nearly drove me mad... (Gigoo, 156). Once again, Zooni's narration meanders wayward and becomes unreliable. In fact, there are certain depths of the subconscious, which can never be touched and deciphered in the domains of authentic reality and legitimate sanity.

An essential aspect of Gigoo's characterization scheme is endowing animals with an individuality of their own. In *The Lion of Kashmir*, the insects, Whitey the female dog, Rani, the pigeon, all are crucial to the construal and comprehension of a world that can no longer be approached as an object but as a creation of the mind. The anthropomorphism adds another dimension to the whole design of magic realism patterned out in the novel. Literary animals, besides other components, in magical realism, are generally regarded as codes, symbols or cryptographs, whose significance





lies in the meaning they impart to others, the values they represent, or the role they play as part of the setting or landscape, and can even be noticed adding a new dimension to reality.

The matchboxes were teeming with insects, some alive, some dead and some battling for their lives because they had been tied to pebbles...What on earth is Zubair up to, I wondered...*Is this what PTSD does to you?*... What I didn't know was whether Zubair was trying to save the insects or destroy them. But it gave him a strange sense of satisfaction" (Gigoo, 70-73)

In treating fictional animals not as ornate, trivial, or purely symbolic, but as characters and "irreplaceable living being[s]," as Derrida describes (378-9), this approach reveals one of the essential characteristics of magical realism itself: the ferality of the mode. Not only is magical realism's inherent ferality reflected in an animal agency displayed by individual animals within particular narratives, but it also determines its mode of narration, the dynamics of storytelling, as a whole. Animals, moreover, serve as mere constructs to represent metaphorical meanings, propelling action and opinion as designed and divine concepts beyond human intervention and limitations.

For instance, Whitey despite being a dog has a place in the narrative. She has lived in Zooni's home with Zubair and Aziz but appears at the safe-house: "Whitey indeed knows and has knowledge of things that are about to unfold. I would not have survived had it not been for her" (Gigoo, 143). Fictional animals, in magical realism and elsewhere, certainly tend to express diverse meanings that could be as much the result of cultural underpinning related to animals or literary techniques such as use of metaphor as by material human-animal relationships, and indeed the lives of animals themselves, whether they directly interrelate with humans or not.

Furthermore, through magic realism, the novel exemplifies Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque as it reverses the categories of the real and the magical, while questioning the very subjectivity of an individual. For instance, when Sridhar puts his finger on the mole on Zooni's face, the mole disappears—"the mole is gone as if it never existed.



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How does he know my secret desires? That I am better off without the mole and the mole was a curse (Gigoo, 12)! The mole, tells Zooni, was a birthmark. Her mother, still carrying Zooni in her womb, had stepped out during an eclipse, against the diktat and had a fall. “A tiny mole appeared on my mother’s face that very instant. When I was born, everyone saw the big mole on my face and panicked. They thought it would bring me bad luck” (13). The sinister and the uncanny, evoking myth and superstition, suggests a parallel between magic realism and the description of carnivalesque in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), stating that carnivalesque is “a world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess, where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled” (8). In fact it is through illusion that the improbable becomes possible. In addition, much of the energy is articulated through the expression of multiple and conflicting perspectives, or polyphonic voices, what Mikhail Bakhtin had referred to as heteroglossia.

More than any other portion of the novel, it is “The Journal of Abdul Aziz” that the form and content— fusion of magic realism as a narrative technique and Bakhtinian carnivalesque as a subversive tool —is explored. What is subverted is the fixed notion of reality, the absolute truth. Aziz remembers Dar’s words:

‘I stand for arms and you stand for ideas,’ he said, demolishing the distinction between the two types of struggle—‘armed’ and ‘ideological’. ‘Both are inseparable and they lead to the same destiny. Our cause is one.’

Clearly, he had gotten his causes mixed up (Gigoo, 177).

The journal section underscores a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationship. In one of the many conversations between Aziz and Dar, the overlooked reality is articulated, as Dar says:

‘How are we going to be remembered? Years from now, people will know the opposite of what actually happened. Because there are people out there right now who are scripting history. We are going to be remembered as villains. It



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will be the worst thing to happen to us. It is better not to be remembered at all' (Gigoo, 231).

Thus, heteroglossia and its subsequent dialogization becomes a distinguishing feature, residing in magic realist form, of the novel. In *The Lion of Kashmir*, both the magical perspective and the realist perspective not merely juxtapose but end up offering multiple and conflicting realities. The liminality that the novel poses, through its narration and through characters—Zooni and Flatnose, Aziz and Dar and even Zubair—opens up a space of qualms and dilemmas, of dispute and variance, of contradictions and intertwinings that facilitates the inferences and connotations to go deeper than the surface of the work, beyond the gaze. Moreover, *The Lion of Kashmir* accentuates a magic realism where the real and the magic maybe structurally diverse, yet they weave out a “unique characteristic [which] is thus a tension not only between the real and magic, but the paradoxical tension between the distinct divergence of the magic and its simultaneous indiscernibility from the real” (Aldea, 94). The narrative, as a magic realist text, offers an author’s viewpoint as that of ‘the Other’, while the narrator’s perspective is idiosyncratic and requiring the readers to put their perception of reality on hold in order to decode the text.

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