

# Magical Realism In Bano Qudsia's Novel Raja Gidh

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## Abstract:

Most Pakistani Urdu writers are unknown in the main stream of world literature due to lack of translations. Bano Qudsia is among them. Her works raise national and international issues including man's quest for power which causes destruction not only of his fellow beings but also of other inhabitants of the earth. This papers intends to highlight Qudsia's contributions in world literature. She constructs her narrative by using the techniques of magical realism in her magnum opus Raja Gidh. Magical realism comprises of a highly detailed and a realistic setting. It is intended as something very strange to be believed (Strecher 267). The main plot of Bano Qudsia's novel Raja Gidh is about human's ordinary life and love but its sub-plot, which is the major subject of this study, constitutes a strange birds' kingdom where birds have their concerns and worries for their survival. This sub-plot of the novel reveals the bitter truth of human beings' intentions that even affect the birds and their kingdom especially the vultures' king, Raja Gidh who becomes made, the earth and all its creatures saw dooms day during World Wars. It all happened due to human's exercise of atomic power. Bano Qudsia narrates such a scenario by using techniques of magical realism and presents pictures of an imagined pre and post-apocalyptic world.

**Keywords:** Magical realism; birds' kingdom; the vultures' king; Raja Gidh.

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the contributions of marginalized writers of the third world to the main stream of literary traditions and to find out their literary techniques in general and the use of genre, magical realism, in particular by a Pakisani Urdu novelist Bano Qudsia in her novel Raja Gidh first published in 1988.

The use of supernaturalism in Western literary traditions started with ancient myths, legends, epics, and have been persevered in various genres (i.e. poetry, drama, novel) of English Literature. We have examples of supernatural and ghostly elements in Anglo-Saxon's anonymous grand

epic Beowulf, Christopher Marlowe's Mephistopheles and Shakespeare's three witches. But slowly this tradition, the appearance of super human beings, was halted. Afterwards the world saw the rise of English novel known for its realism in details that includes works of Samuel Richardson, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Dickens.

Magical realism has been applied to those literary experiences and publications that involved the supernatural elements mixed with the real or realism. It is because magical-realistic novels are completely realistic and at the same time they are completely fantastic. There is no "magic" in the

fantasy sense, and nor “true” realism but there is only the fantastic substituting for the real in a search for the truth (Sarah 3). Magical realism often comes from marginalized writers. The practice of magic realism and its divergence from the Western literary canon found a way of writing that leads itself to writers outside of the dominant discourse who are marginalized by society (Sarah 11). The unsurpassed explanation of magic realism is found in the fiction of Salman Rushdie whose work *Midnight’s Children* have had a great effect on literary discourse (Thamarana 266)

Having emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Latin America with the works of Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende, magical realism explored the supernatural and magic to the world of realities. It is simply “the amalgamation of realism and fantasy” (Guest 41).

### **Maggie Ann Bowers on Magical Realism:**

To prove the significance and criticality of magic realism, Maggie Ann Bowers made a long debate in her book *Magic(al) Realism* (2004). This section analyzes the views of Bowers on magical realism.

Magischer Realismus/magical realism coined by Germans in 1920s in their paintings to understand the mysteries of life behind its surface realities. This term was also introduced by writers of Latin America in 1940s (Bowers 02). In magical realism the meaning of ‘magic’ refers to the ‘mystery of life’; here ‘magic’ or ‘magic(al)’ suggests an extraordinary happening, occurrence that is ‘spiritual or unaccountable by rational science’(Bowers 19). This includes the appearances of ghosts, miracles, extraordinary events and strange atmosphere in literature. As a whole in magical realism it is supposed that anything extraordinary really happens (Bowers 19).

The term ‘realism’ introduced in philosophical discussion in the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Modern realism postulates that truth may be discovered by one’s sense and there are associations between our senses and the world around us (Bowers 20). Realism presumes that the external world is real and our senses help us to understand it. Whereas Aristotle claimed that the imitation of life is a ‘natural instinct of human’. He also claimed that it is better to convince the readers of realism with something impossible rather than to be unconvincing about something that is true (qtd. in Bowers 20). Resultantly Aristotle opened a path to comprehend the realism of narratives in fiction

Realism is commonly associated with novel, a widespread form of literature and it represents life. In order to catch the readers’ sympathy and interest, it is better to present a realistic account of life that is recognizable. Catherine Belsey calls this as ‘Classical Realism’; as in late 19<sup>th</sup> century the novels were to show the reader an elucidation of reality (qtd. in Bowers 20). Furthermore, the theories of 20<sup>th</sup> century interconnected to realism and literature insist on the imaginative process and this form of realism should also emphasize the technique of narrative as “the novel’s realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents life” (Watt 06). And as Catherine Belsey explains, ‘Realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar’ (qtd. in Bowers 21). This approach moves towards realism and is relevant to the genre of magical realism, as magical realism is about the presentation of ‘real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real’. The key to understanding how magical realism functions is to know the means in which a narrative is written in order to provide a realistic context for the magical events of the fiction. “Magical realism therefore relies upon realism but only so that it

can stretch what is acceptable as real to its limits.” (Bowers 21).

### **Bano Qudsia and Raja Gidh**

Bano Qudsia, Bano Aapa, (1928-2017) was a renowned Urdu Pakistani fiction writer. She is among the Urdu intellectual canon of Pakistan and wife of Ashwaq Ahmad, a very well-known scholar and spiritual intellect of Pakistan. Qudsia produced thirty publications based on novels, dramas, plays and short stories. She is best recognized for her everlasting novel Raja Gidh. She also wrote for television and stage in Pakistani vernaculars including Urdu and Punjabi. Her play Aadhi Baat has been called "a classic play". In spite of such a rich craft with versatile themes, she has not been given a major place in literary academia of the world literature. It is because only a few of her works have been translated into English and the readers around the world are unaware of her cosmopolitan thoughts. This paper is an effort to let the English audience know about the ripeness and maturity of Qudsia's art.

Raja Gidh (1981) is one of the Qudsia's best publications and is considered milestone in Pakistani Urdu fiction. Gidh is an Urdu language word means a vulture' and Raja is synonymous to king. So together it means the King of Vultures. In Raja Gidh Qudsia narrates an odyssey of man's mind, his intellect, wit and cunningness, his love and loath, his supremacy and weakness, his sovereignty and heteronomy. This Urdu masterpiece has its metaphorical significance. Vultures nurture and rely on carrion; this symbolizes the character of Queem, the Raja Gidh, who is altogether the protagonist and as well as an antagonist of the novel; fulfills his sexual urge from the neglected members of the society, from Seemi Shah, a lost lover whose beloved has left her altogether and likewise from Amtal, an old actress and a prostitute who lost her charms now and rejected by most of his clients.

There are many such ethically derogatory elements in the novel that hearken for moral correction

Bano Qudsia is among the leading Pakistani writers of Urdu literature written after the division of India in 1947. Beside it is interesting to note that Qudsia used many English words in-between her Urdu sentences in the novel. It is to give 'a foreign touch' to her works (Khokhar 115-16 qtd. in Mushtaq 247). Rizwan and Akhtar uttered that Qudisa has borrowed many English words and has applied a technique of code-mixing (13515). Qandeel declares that Raja Gidh is an "ideological novel" and explored its characters' intellect (qtd. in Mazhar etl. 82). Qaudisa's philosophical profundity of her vision allows universality in her work. Raja Gidh is a psychological as well as philosophical novel as it portrays psyche of man, his grief and agony and opens vistas of inner world. Mazhar et al state that the protagonist of Qudsia undergoes psychological suffering and has to struggle against his mental turmoil. His conflicting acts against social established norms cause him severe stress (79).

The novel is divided into two plots and second plot has four main sections. Qudsia presents an animal kingdom in the second plot. Every section of the second plot reflects magical realism and carry unique meanings and subtexts. This animal kingdom reveals metaphorical implication and psychological distress faced by a king vulture, Raja Gidh, and its tribe who have been deeply affected by humans' affairs and interests in atomic energy which caused a massive destruction. As a result these vultures, as Qandeel highlights, commit 'prohibited actions' that lead them to their insanity (qtd. in Mazhar et al 82).

### **Main Plot**

Bano Qudsia applied a different technique for presenting her ideas. There are at least two plots

the main plot and a second or subplot plot. The both plots have no resemblance as for as characters are concerned. But their themes ask about reasons for human madness, human love and lost. The main plot has three major characters including Seemi Shah, Quym and Aftab whereas there are other minor but important characters. Seemi Shah, a member of upper middle class and a student of MA Sociology from Govt. College, Lahore, loves Aftab, her class fellow. Being a modern and charming girl, she attracts Qayyum, her another classmate and her teacher professor Suhail. Aftab and Seemi come in contact and liked each other but afterwards Aftab leaves her as he was trapped by professor Suhail's plotting against Seemi. He called her an opportunist who never really loves Aftab. Resultantly Aftab breaks up with Seemi. Seemi being disappointed and desperate finds shelter in Qayyum who despite loving her, fulfills his sexual desires from her but afterwards, Qayyum feels sorry for all that happened between him and Seemi. Seemi after breaking up with Aftab, is restless and under a mental trauma and unable to live a peaceful life. She being a mentally fragile person finally comments suicide whereas Qayyum realizes her sinful ventures against Seemi and develops a real love for her after her death and remains repentant, disturbed and somehow mad throughout his life.

### **The second plot:**

The second plot is also an important talk and interprets human reason of madness Deewanghi. This plot narrates a kingdom of birds where uncountable birds are assembled in a conference to settle a serious matter of Raja Gidh's, the vultures' king, reason of madness. Some senior birds are of the view that the Raja Gidh has become made like human. He is dangerous for other birds as human being is dangerous for his fellow beings so Raja Gidh should be expelled from the jangle. This debate of birds goes on till the end of the novel.

As a whole the novel is about human psychological disorder or madness metaphorically represented in the form of a vultures' king and its madness in the second plot. For Qudsia madness may be constructive or destructive and is a necessary to know the differences between these types of madness and result is always a wise talk or discourse.

### **Translator's note**

I have tried to provide an over view and short glimpses of birds' kingdom from Urdu to English so that the Anglophonic readers may understand the Pakistani Urdu literary elegant and the magical realism found in Qudsia's art of storytelling. To accomplish this very task, I have taken help from the actual text, Raja Gidh (1988) of Bano Qudsia and I myself translated some of its portions into English. Beside I also have taken help from a brief translated version of the actual text 'Raja Gidh' under the title of 'The King Buzzard' (2010) by Raja Masood

### **Magical Realism in Raja Gidh**

The writers of magical realism are interested in strange setting(s) of time and place in their magical realistic works of fiction as Matthew Strecher calls magic realism "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe"(263). Such fiction dips into a realistic point of view of this contemporary world and it also adds the magical elements including its setting. Sometimes it is called as fabulism (i.e. fables and allegory). It refers to fiction and literature in particular. In Raja Gidh, Bano Qudsia has constituted two plots. The first and main plot has an ordinary setting of Pakistani society, the city of Lahore and its locals including its institutions, offices, mohalas, streets and the time of this plot is post-independence Pakistan whereas the setting of the second plot which is actual concern of this study, is strangely contrasting to the first

one. There is an adorable description about a thickest forest of Potohar, Pakistan. Qadsia narrates that there were tall and thickly intertwined trees; there were streams running through them; there were a lot of birds. We have an unusual description of a yogi who has been mediating on the beaches of Potohar for round about 300 years. This strange Yogi, with his prayers and magical spells, had turned back the ocean into the Arabian Sea.

Such and other many strange ideas are found with minute details in *Raja Gidh*. Qudsia really has mastery over imagery and she knits her intriguing expressions in an elegant manner. She minutely observed the Pakistani society and has utilized magical realism in an allegorical style in *Raja Gidh* where we have myth and fable work together. She explores the strange realities by utilizing faculty of her imaginary. No other writer of her age utilized such images and thought provoking elements that discuss the realities of life and human follies. For instance in the second plot the birds talk like humans and discuss the social issues very seriously like philosophers.

An aggressive kite replied, “Master! We are seriously concerned that human has progressed now. He even has visited other planets but his instinct caused his own madness and destruction. He invented weapons that may ruin the earth and its inhabitants and we see that some of us also received likewise madness that is dangerous to all of us (Qudsia 28)

For Salman Rushdie the magical realism is ‘the commingling of the improbable and mundane’ (qtd. in Bowers 03). Qudsia’s craft also blends imagined realities; she mixes the unreal into real. As it seems so outlandish that how birds talk but they pour light upon the realities faced by humanity. These birds are seriously concerned about their peace and survival. Qudsia’s world of magical realism exponents that the birds’ kingdom is not just a fictional empire but rather it

symbolizes a critical situation where world has to face the nuclear war fair and its aftershocks may ruin the Mother Nature and its inhabitants. It is strange but wonderful for readers to know that the birds of Qudisa have their concerns about the world of humans; they even have their king and there is a senior most bird, the Huma, who chooses the king for humans. There are birds who act as lawyers, as victims, as listeners, as litigants; birds as complainants and accusers and as accused, as supporters and prosecutors. They have their own laws and the king bird functions as magistrate. There are snakes under the grass who secretly listen the trials among the birds; and there is a jackal who is a defense lawyer for *Raja Gidh*, the accused bird.

Magical realism also holds a tacit and indirect criticism of social norms and society. The novels of this genre have ‘hybrid multiple planes’ about realities. The universe of magical realism is not escape from reality but it is an artificial world within the actual one meant to set us for a better understanding of it. (Arva 78-79). In four sections of second plot of the novel *Raja Gidh* where the kingdom of birds is narrated Bano Qudsia problematizes the issue of king Bazaar’s madness and its relation to human madness.

In the first section of the second plot, Qudsia narrates that there was a thick jungle with tall trees, and streams, and numberless birds in Potohar, Pakistan. This jungle was flourished centuries ago in the first age of human civilization. The humans by utilizing their knowledge then invented destructive atomic bombs and travelled to planet of Mars and Jupiter. The human used those bombs and destroyed the God’s kingdom including that thick jungle. This story of birds had happened just before the destruction of World War I. The animals and birds were fearful for human’s destructive weapons. Consequently a conference of birds was held in the jungle and all the birds around the

world were invited to attend it and discuss the mutual consensus. (Raja Gidh 1988, 23, 24)

Qudsia narrates that all the birds had been waiting for the arrival of Huma<sup>1</sup> bird, the president of the conference. In absence of Huma, Simurgh<sup>2</sup>, the most senior and experienced member accepted the responsibility and presided the conference.

The plot further explains besides discussing the humans destructive intentions against planet earth and its inhabitants, the birds have also to settle a serious matter about the punishment of Raja Qidh, the king of vultures, who has become made now. There were a fear among birds that Raja Gidh and his madness was dangerous for all of them and all were willing to banish him and all other vultures of his flock. The birds were trying to find the connections between Raja Didh's madness and human beings' madness who dreamt to destroy the world by creating atomic weapons.

The Simurgh, the birds' magistrate, announced, "This matter is so grave. We must know that if Raja Gidh's madness is threat to other birds, and what may be the actual reason of his madness"

Most birds were demanding that Raja Gidh should be expelled from the jangle and they blustered, "Expel! Expel!"

To calm down all, Surkhab bird, the legal advisor, said, "Brothers! The issue is critical to decide, all the world's birds are present here. It is better to settle the issue by voting"

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<sup>1</sup> This bird *Huma* has its origin in Persian mythology that it flies whole of its life and remains invisible (Green 27-28). On the contrary the *Huma* of Qudsia was in search of a Messiah who may save the humanity.

<sup>2</sup>The bird *Simurgh* has also its origin and significance in Persian myths and legends that report that *Simurgh* bird is ancient one and has a long age that it had seen three times the ruination of the world. Hamid Dabashi describes that Farid ud-Din Attar, a famous Persian

But the jungle listened the uproar of birds again, Banish him! Banish him!"

An old kite suggested, "Why don't you send Raja Gidh to the world of humans. As they are making bombs that may destroy all life and when they kill their own beings, let the Gidh jati, the vultures be among them" (Qudsia 29-31)

The discussions and unending arguments of the birds go on but the matter has not been settled till the end of second session.

The third section of the second plot is more idealistic and strange as the setting has changed now. Qudisa this time reveals that the all the birds gathered for their second conference held in the Jangles of Ranicoat, Pakistan. This time the world has seen the massacres of World War I, but the same numberless birds are assembled with the same subject to find the reason of Raja Gidh's madness and correlate it with the madness of mankind who once destroyed their own race. During their discussion, they are now recounting the mass destruction that had happened in the war and are worried that this would happen in the second time:

This time the Cheel Jati, the kites who functioned like the politicians of the birds, were aware that most of the members of birds were with them, and even the Mena bird was not supporting the Raja Gidh and his clan. At this a Cheel pronounced in tiresome manner:

Oh Raja Gidh! We cannot wait for your legal advisor, the jackal. It is possible that the

writer wrote his ballad poem 'Conference of Birds' in 12<sup>th</sup> century in which he narrates an anecdote about a flock of birds searching *Simurgh* as they want it to their king (124) whereas Qudsia narrates the bird *Simurgh* presiding the birds' conference, and has been alive since thousands of centuries that it even remained as a refugee in the old ship of Baba Noah, the prophet of God.

humans after becoming civilized, they may build bombs a second time that may again cause destruction of the world within a while, if you want to show your legal advisor, show him now.

When the jackal arrived the Surkhab cleverly informed him that the birds, and insects, the animals and humans live in this earth peacefully. Only human is of a pugnacious nature. He has developed himself by his knowledge. Afterwards he utilized his knowledge to make such weapons that burnt the cities and caused mass destruction on the God's kingdom and the Cheel Jati believe that human did all this out of his own madness which demands him to demolish his own race. The same madness has appeared in Raja Gidh now which may cause him to demolish all other birds (Qudsia 355-360)

The birds of Qudsia had a long age. They were alive before many centuries of the first generation of humans and they still were alive after the World War II. The prominent bird characters who have such a long age were the Queen of Cheel Jati, the Simurage, and the Raja Gidh himself; and many other birds. Qudsia strangely prolonged their age to create magical and captivating influence among her readers. The serious subject matter of Raja Gidh's madness, human madness due to his progress, and human's interest in nuclear bombing go on till the end of the novel.

This time, in the fourth section of the second plot and after another World War, another international conference was held on the mountains of Tibet. Qudsia reports that the birds somehow managed to survive. They found a shelter on the mountains of Tibet, when the explosions were burst. They were so said to see the ruined and deserted earth, their jungles, all green places have been no more now. Qudsia states that the major cities of earth were hit and there were ashes in places of populated places.

There was no greenery on the continents. All the waters of the world were poisonous. Now this time, all birds of Qudsai felt the pain of earth and seemed so serious and extremely willing to decide the matter. Raja Gidh had no reason to tell the truth of his story. Here Qudisa's technique of magical realism is on its climax when her strangest character speaks and narrated the reason of his madness that came in him from humans.

At last the Raja Gidh accepted his madness and spoke that once he came in the contact with an old yogi who was so strange that he only wore a few pieces of torn clothes. This old yogi came in connect with Raja Gidh and used to share his experiences of life with the Raja Gidh and in return Raja Gidh informed him about the secrets of the forests. The Yogi wanted to be eternal, to live an eternal life like God. When the death came to him; he deceived it by his magic and experience. But at last, one day when Raja Gidh came to the Yogi, he was hanged in the old tree, all dead. The Raja Gidh tried to set his corpse free, but he bit him unavoidably and tasted the blood of yogi, the human. From that blood of human, the madness, the destructive nature of humans transferred into the Raja Gidh. Since then he felt the same madness of humans, as humans kill their own fellow beings; the Raja Gidh and his offspring also wish to kill the other birds of jangle (Qudsia 457-471)

Qudsia allegorically expresses that the humans, their development, their progress and so called modernity is hazardous to earth and its inhabitants. She while employing her spellbound magical realism ultimately criticizes the superpowers of the world are the actual responsible for the destruction and chaos of humanity. These superpowers due to their pride, and envy never cared for the inhabitants of earth. Qudsia explores that the nature and all its stakeholders including our mother earth, mountains, deserts, landscapes, all forests, all

birds, all reptiles and animals are fatally effected by the evil plans of man.

### Conclusion

Magial realism is commonly associated with Latin American writers and it is thought that the writers of the East and South Asia have different approaches in their regional languages. Bano Qudsia who is among front raked writers of Urdu literature has applied this technique of magical realism in a way that breaks the geographical borders and harkens the plea of planet earth, and exposes the realities and reasons behind the destructions around the world. The contributions of South Asian writers like Bano Qudsia in world literature may remain anonymous but this translated work is an attempt to bring their fiction in the main stream academia.

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