

From *The Tin Drum* to *Midnight's Children*: Using magical realism to interrogate history

Vaseem Khan

'Realism can break a writer's heart.' So said Salman Rushdie, author of the 1981 novel *Midnight's Children*, and a leading light in the magical realist firmament. I suspect that his critique was nuanced, referring to more than just a general sentiment. Realism was the mid-nineteenth-century artistic and literary movement aimed at representing familiar things 'as they are', in direct contrast to the prevailing ideals of Romanticism. At a time when science and industry were transforming the world, Realist authors (beginning with French and Russian writers such as Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy and Pushkin) began to write about everyday activities and experiences, often in excruciating detail. The advent of magical realism, which sets out to do almost the exact opposite, was thus a seismic event in the literary arena.

The term *Magischer Realismus*, translated as magic realism, was first used by German romantic poet and philosopher Novalis and was then taken up by the art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to refer to a style of painting that sought to portray the 'magical' nature of the rational world. Magical realism soon found its way back into the literary realm, primarily through Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges, who championed the style in Latin America. His collection of short stories, *A Universal History of Infamy* – consisting of fictionalised accounts of real criminals – is considered by many as the genesis of the literary magical realism movement.

Many definitions of magical realism have emerged over the decades. It is, in essence, a literary style that paints a realistic view of the modern world whilst employing magical or fabulist elements. Myth, allegory, satire

and the supernatural are routinely layered atop otherwise real-world scenarios. Magical realism blurs the line between reality and fantasy without ever losing sight of that underlying reality. This makes the style particularly popular with writers intent on delivering polemics. For instance, Rushdie argues that 'magic realism allows political ideas to be expressed in ways that might not be possible through more established literary forms.'

The modern popularity of the style is often attributed to the man many consider the 'godfather' of the genre, Colombian novelist and Nobel Laureate, Gabriel García Márquez. The 1967 publication of his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* set the template for a generation, Rushdie among them.

García Márquez's novel tells the story of the Buendía family, whose patriarch, José Arcadio Buendía, founds the fictitious Colombian town of Macondo. The epic tale of seven generations of Buendías is replete with allusion and historical reference, and yet the supernatural and the surreal suffuse every page – a plague of insomnia, levitating priests, swarms of butterflies and talking ghosts. The novel leads us through Latin American history: a narrative of civil war and colonialism, of tin-pot dictatorship and social repression.

One Hundred Years of Solitude met with instant success. In 1970, Robert Kiely, writing in the Books section of the *New York Times*, called it 'a South American Genesis.' Since then, the novel has been translated into 40 languages and sold over 50 million copies. It's universally recognised as a foundational text in the magical realist oeuvre.

García Márquez claimed that the book was born out of the unique challenge facing Latin American writers – how to make their 'outsized' world believable.

That notion is certainly much in evidence in the book that first introduced me to the magical realist style: *Midnight's Children*.

Almost two decades ago, I ducked into a basement bookstore in

Mumbai, attempting to evade the monsoon rain lashing down outside. As I prowled the aisles, I came across a copy of this seminal work. I had heard of Salman Rushdie, but never read him. Intrigued by the blurb, I bought the book.

That evening I began reading... and was instantly spellbound not only by the tale unfolding before me, but the style in which it was being told. I had not encountered literary magical realism before and found myself astounded by the virtuosity of Rushdie's prose and the courage it took to write in such an unfettered way.

Literary fiction, perhaps more than any genre, is circumscribed by certain expectations. Magical realism flies in the face of many of these unwritten rules. For me, as a young, unpublished novelist, it was a shot in the arm. I was reminded of that old Biblical saying: Where once I was blind, now I can see.

The second thing to strike me as I read Rushdie's masterwork, was how momentous events need not be tackled with po-faced seriousness; instead, wit, effervescence and imagination can be employed to deliver insight.

Midnight's Children is the story of one thousand children born in the first hour of independent India's existence, all of whom possess magical powers. The story's hero and narrator, Saleem Sinai, is born with telepathic powers. More importantly, it is the story of India itself, from the last days of British rule all the way through to the Emergency – a period of constitutional anarchy imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975.

The book begins with one of the greatest openings in modern literature: 'I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more ... On the stroke of mid-

night, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world.'

The fact that the novel contains absurdism, magic, and elements of the supernatural does not detract from the socio-political points it aims to make. It encouraged me, a relative newcomer to subcontinental history, to look up the events that were being described and to judge for myself what was 'real', and what had been embellished.

A strange thing happened. After a while, it became unimportant that some of these events had been woven into the story with a surrealist thread. Rushdie's take illuminated those events in a way a traditional recounting could not have done, particularly stories of massacre and violence, a common motif in his description of India's emergence from the Raj. As Saleem Sinai himself tells us: 'Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it any less real.'

The publication of *Midnight's Children* won Rushdie the Booker Prize, placed him at the forefront of world literature, and marked him as the successor to Gabriel García Márquez. It gave us a version of the birth of modern India and the Partition that was vibrant, alive, and open to interpretation, unlike the mechanistic formulations of so much literature focused on that period. It has been criticised for its irreverence, but Rushdie weaponised magical realism, using it as other writers use straightforward satire. He employed black humour and caustic wit, even farce, and in so doing, brought to life the history that he was seeking to relate.

Reading *Midnight's Children* encouraged me to look up *The Guardian's* '100 Greatest Novels of All Time', and *Time* magazine's 'All-Time 100 Novels', and begin to work my way through them. (If there is one labour I can recom-

mend to budding novelists that will improve their 'prose craft', it is this.) On those lists I discovered numerous works of magical realism: *Beloved* by Toni Morrison; *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami; *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass. This last is another touchstone in magical realist literature.

When I first read *The Tin Drum*, I had the same feeling of profound literary joy as I had experienced when reading *Midnight's Children*. This novel, by Günter Grass, was published in 1959. It was his debut and is still his best known work. It tells the story of Oskar Matzerath, a dwarf, confined to an insane asylum and looking back at his eventful life. The book is often read as a critique of the Second World War as it affected Poland, and of the post-war period. But it is so much more than that. From the beginning, we understand that Grass is not going to tell his story with a straight bat like other writers chronicling the period.

Oskar is born in 1924 in the Free City of Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland), with fully-formed adult sensibilities. Gifted with a piercing shriek that can shatter glass, Oskar decides never to grow up when he hears his father declare that his son will become a grocer. Thus, his appearance remains child-like as he lives through the beginning of the Second World War, and, later, post-war Europe. Through all this, he bangs manically on a toy drum, given to him by his parents.

The Tin Drum combines history, satire, fable and polemic. As Oskar pulverises each new drum, the frenzy of his drumming matches the oppressive events unfolding around him. Grass educates us as well as delivering his critique. For instance, it is from *The Tin Drum* that I learned of Poland's fate in the war, and of the role of the Polish Post Office in the beginnings of that conflict.

The Defence of the Polish Post Office in Danzig was one of the first

acts of the war in Europe. On September 1, 1939, Polish post office workers defended their headquarters for 15 hours against assaults by a German SS unit. Ultimately, they were burned out of the building. They surrendered, were subsequently sentenced to death by a German court martial as 'illegal combatants', executed, and buried in a mass grave. Only four of the defenders escaped and survived the war. Such was the horror of this episode that Grass devotes an entire chapter to it in his novel, interweaving it with an absurdist narrative involving a man Oskar suspects of being his real father, Jan Bronski, who inadvertently finds himself inside the post office when it is attacked.

The Tin Drum broke all the rules. It was loud, brash and stylistically arrogant. The book was Grass's attempt to confront the several versions of German history he had been taught and align them with the history he had experienced. Oskar is Grass's witness to that history, an unreliable narrator, perhaps, yet we are never in any doubt as to the veracity of his claims. At its heart, the novel is a political polemic, but also heavily critical of both Jewish and Christian doctrine. Oskar holds conversations with both Jesus and Satan throughout the book. At one point his gang members call him 'Jesus', and later he refers to himself as 'Satan'.

Initial reaction to the novel was mixed. It was called blasphemous and pornographic by some, and legal action was taken against both it and Grass. Today, it is regarded as a classic of post-World War II literature. To 'beat a tin drum' means to create a disturbance in order to bring attention to a cause. In this respect, Grass succeeded admirably, and in no small measure this was due to the magical realist style that he chose to adopt.

Midnight's Children. One Hundred Years of Solitude. The Tin Drum. These three novels form my personal holy trinity of magical realism. In

a very real sense, they have inspired my own work. I lived in India for a decade during my twenties. I witnessed a country undergoing immense social, economic and cultural change. I saw wealth pour into the country, transforming societal norms. And yet the legacies of the past remain.

In the West, we are sometimes guilty of mythologizing the subcontinent. In order to redress the balance, I decided to depict India as she is, a place of both light and dark, of colour and conflict. My books in the Baby Ganesh Agency series follow a former Mumbai police inspector as he navigates the rocky terrain of modern India. Aiding him in his task is a baby elephant. The elephant is a symbol, a metaphor for a country undergoing transformation, seeking to maintain its identity as the forces of westernisation and globalisation rage through it. I freely admit that the elephant is my magical realist prop. It does not talk, it does not fly, it does not sing. Yet its very presence by the side of a sober policeman asks the reader to cross the line from straight fiction to the realms of the fantastical and intuitive.

I do this unashamedly. As Chopra, my ex-policeman, solves crimes, he dissects the modern India that he sees around him, and his elephant sidekick acts as a mystical interlocutor between reality and myth. For India is a country steeped in myth, in fabulism, and in a multi-generational belief in the supernatural.

Magical realist novels do not ask readers to believe that the fantastic is true. Instead, they invite readers to reflect on why an author has chosen to employ this method of telling their tale. As Gabriel García Márquez observed, sometimes history is too outsized to be contained by the conventional. Magical realism bridges the gap between the real and the what-may-yet-be.

Vaseem Khan

Vaseem Khan is the author of the bestselling Baby Ganesh Detective Agency series featuring Indian detective Ashwin Chopra and his baby elephant sidekick. The first book in the series, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra* was a *Times* bestseller and a Waterstones Paperback of the Year, now translated into 13 languages. The second in the series won a Shamus Award in America. In 2018 he was awarded the Eastern Eye ACTA (Arts, Culture and Theatre Award) for Literature. His books aim to take readers on a journey to the heart of modern India, exploring social issues and the realities of life in a country being transformed by unprecedented global change. Vaseem was born in London, but spent a decade working in India in his twenties. Since 2006 he has worked at University College London's Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science. His latest book is *Bad Day at the Vulture Club* about the murder of a wealthy Parsee in Mumbai's notorious Towers of Silence where the Parsee dead are left to be eaten by vultures.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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