

WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND MAGICAL REALISM IN THE FICTION OF MOHAMMED HANIF

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136 By and large, most discussions of magical realism in South Asian English fiction appear to start and end with Salman Rushdie's celebrated *Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*. This is despite Homi Bhabha's oft-quoted proclamation that magical realism is the most favourable/favoured literary mode for/of postcolonial writers (7). It is beyond the scope of this study to go into any depth as to why this has been the state of literary affairs in South Asian Anglophone fiction. Suffice it to say that magical realism—understood as a literary mode arising from Latin America and eventually gaining traction with writers located in different parts of the world, did not develop deep roots in South Asia for political, historical, and aesthetic reasons. Except for a few—and sometimes contentious—cases, such as some works of Begum Rokkeya, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra, O.V. Vijayan, and others, magical realism is mostly identified with Rushdie's writing and remains a largely untouched literary mode in contemporary South Asian Anglophone fiction.¹

Given this spotty history, Pakistani Anglophone author Mohammed Hanif's novels are anomalies: they are magical realist and their literary lineage can be traced back to commonly accepted features of the genre; at the same time, these novels also display a mistrust of both the realist and the magical narrative strands, setting them apart from more conventional examples of magical realism. Hanif's narratives adapt magical realism in very specific ways to articulate the experiences of several oppressed communities within modern Pakistan, yet offer neither hope or succour. His three novels to date—*A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2009; hereafter cited as *CEM*), *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011; hereafter cited as *OLAB*), and *Red Birds* (2018)—are certainly magical realist in their use of the supernatural and abnormal alongside the historically 'real' events and places. The identities, histories, and socio-cultural makeup of the characters bring to life very local worlds, while oppression

and violence in the wake of dictatorships and religious fundamentalism make their appeal immediately global. However, the strands or elements of magic in *CEM* and *OLAB* are developed in a manner distinct from the majority of magical realist novels.

To substantiate this claim, it would be useful to briefly summarize the key narrative and politico-ethical features of magical realism. While magical realism, as the name suggests, operates on the binary of the realist and the magical, the two exist as “natural” extensions of each other, as “two codes that [are] interwound, [...] in a tight choreography of antitheses” (Wilson 212). Neither code is hierarchically superior or more credible to the other, which implies that magical realism questions the limits of realism, but is also an extension of the articulation of the experience of reality itself. It works by bringing the conventionally “abnormal” into the very folds that have declared it abnormal, so that it appears as though these abnormal events “had always already been there; their abnormality normalized from the moment that their magical realist worlds were imagined” (220). Just as realism would not need to justify itself, magic—the unnatural or supernatural—does not justify its presence. Magic, like realism, is imbued in communities and/or landscapes, and cannot be effected by magicians or entertainers, nor is it a means of (fantastic) escape from the banality or brutality of the realist world within which it creates and operates.

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Anne Hegerfeldt argues that magical realism is not a new literary or cognitive technique; rather, it is simply “tracing the various strategies by which individuals and communities try—and always have tried—to make sense of the world” (64). There is a crucial ethical and political dimension embedded in this argument. It opposes the singular, Western, rationality-heavy mode of channelling experiential truth and narrativization, and it is almost always “a mode of writing that responds to a particular cultural situation (marginalisation, multiculturalism, displacement, and so forth)” (Bényei 150). Colonial and official historiography often tend to discredit local events, *petit-histoires*, and belief systems for more hegemonically normative modes of remembering and telling. Magical realism is a way, then, to give the marginalized, or the ex-centric, a voice.

In conventional magical realist worlds, magic is imbued in communities, cultures, and landscapes, as most Latin American magical realists would argue. Additionally, a magical realist world does not begin with a “zero degree of realism” that is eventually altered by the intrusion of the magical (Bényei 153); rather, the magical is always already present. On both these counts, *CEM* and *OLAB* differ from other examples of magical realist novels. For one, magic, including curses and miracles, is a small and discrete part of the plot, developing almost independently of the otherwise realist, though parodic and darkly satirical, thread and it is only towards the end of the narratives that the magical and real collide. Moreover, both are treated with deep scepticism. Second, in both cases, it is individual women rather than communities that experience and affect the magical.

Hanif’s novels also depart from the standard in contemporary Pakistani writing in English in another crucial way: while a spate of post 9/11 Pakistani writing has

intimately and sensitively dealt with the geopolitics of the region and the figure of the terrorist,² Hanif's fiction emphasizes the oppression of women within Pakistani culture while also incorporating the macrohistory of nationhood, particularly in his first two novels, which will be discussed here.³ A brief outline of these two novels illustrates this: *CEM* is set around the last year of the military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq's life and his death, the factual details of which remain a mystery to this day, and the state of Pakistan under an increasingly orthodox religious rule. The novel's protagonist is Air Force Junior Under Officer Ali Shigri, seeking to avenge the death of his father, a decorated general of dubious morality who was killed by Zia's men. *OLAB* is set (presumably in the late 1980s or early 1990s) in a hospital in Pakistan, whose eponymous protagonist is a nurse, Alice Bhatti, who seemingly has magical powers but who lives a tragic life and dies a horrific death, thanks to her religious, caste, and gendered identity and her marriage to a man whose cultural beliefs bolster his absolute claim over his wife's body and mind. Within the scope of the story of the nation at large, *CEM* and *OLAB* foreground these women characters, whose gender, religion, caste, and class form the web within which they are subjected to many kinds of violence, in private as well as public and institutionalized spaces.

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Hanif's writings serve another purpose for the larger cause of magical realism's relevance to writers from postcolonial backgrounds whose fiction is cosmopolitan or transnational. His novelistic worlds do not dwell upon the colonial rule or its aftermath, the partition of India, or the Raj, and refer to these only very laterally. Instead, they revolve around American neo-imperialism⁴ in modern-day Pakistan and the neighbouring Afghanistan, as well as increasing religious orthodoxy, failures of the judiciary and other political institutions, and rampant discrimination based on religion, gender, caste, and class, most of which are corruptions common to more than one nation. The resulting violence, in both words and action, perpetrated on the marginalized by individuals and institutions make *CEM* and *OLAB* compelling voices for and of the ex-centric. Notably, the position of the ex-centric is highlighted by imbuing it with magic.

Theo D'haen claims that magical realism creates a "*ruse* to invade and take over dominant discourse(s)" such as realism and rationality, the domain of the privileged (195). Hanif uses magical realism to serve this agenda by disrupting dominant discourses of religion, state, and patriarchy and carves out a territory for women characters and their worlds, who, as Wendy Faris points out, probably require the aid of magic in a society that oppresses them in practice and narrative (*Ordinary Enchantments* 176). Realism in such narratives is primarily in the service of patriarchal culture and the nation-state, denouncing all that does not fit its contours as wrong, delusional, or abnormal. In such a stifling context, magical realism allows for women, who are often written out of histories, to be written back in and thereby disrupt dominant discourses such as realism and patriarchy. Often, Faris argues, this might be the only available option: "women, like subalterns generally, can be understood to act through magic because other routes may be closed to them. In addition,

a female voice may be able to transmit the ineffable because of its marginal position within the discourses of reason and realism that have tended to mute that mystical sound" (178). It must, however, be cautioned, that unlike the liberatory politics of much feminist magical realist writing, such as Allende's *The House of the Spirits* or Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, Hanif's novels provide no relief or redemption for their heroines. The cycle of violence in its myriad forms, both culturally and institutionally sanctioned, continues to be perpetuated, and is reflected in the cyclical narrative structure as well. In a colonial context, the colonized's barbarity was equated with magic, a symptom of irrationality. In *CEM* and *OLAB*, the ruler/the male/the powerful is barbaric, and the only break in the face of such injustice and violence is through manifestations of magic.

Another key feature of these two novels is the language of scepticism and rumour that runs throughout the narrative(s), subsuming both the 'realist' and the 'magical.' Rumour is a two-edged sword. It can lead to conflagrations and whip up mob frenzies, but is also an excellent device with which to undermine the sanctity of official versions of events and occurrences and to articulate suppressed memory and knowledge. When the narrator uses rumour to treat both the magical and the realistic, he primarily undermines the accepted truth value of the realist but, on the side, also the efficacy of miracles or superstition. Nevertheless, the very act of writing these abnormal events into the realist narratives stretches the space for unnatural or supernatural possibilities to be accommodated, and in places, provides some form of relief, even when the characters with 'magical powers' gain little to no personal agency. There is, then, an internal dialogic conflict that undermines magic through scepticism while also positing the events as actual, at par with the realist ones, whose reliability is often made suspect by irony and satire. *CEM* and *OLAB* examine commonplace violence and the perils of religious fundamentalism and political dictatorship, and allow an examination of "the relationships between writing and ideology, centre and margin, form and content, and, above all, with the cultural politics of utilising a mode of representation that appears to repudiate the key epistemological premises of the modern world view" (Warnes 75-76). Above all, magical realist worlds such as Hanif's create a "psycho-social history" (90)⁵ of a community or nation through the creation/excavation of *petit-histoires*, myths, subjectivities, and alternative narratives.

While Hanif acknowledges the influence of several recognizable magical realist writers and weaves allusions to them into his narratives, he also distances himself from the tag of magical realism. In a small autobiographical note, Hanif recalls his days as an Air Force cadet in Pakistan when he discovered writers such as Salman Rushdie, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Luis Borges, and Gabriel García Márquez (*CEM* 372). *CEM* is known to have been inspired by Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*; the last book that Ali's friend and lover Obaid is reading in *CEM* is *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Ali and Obaid have a brief discussion about prolepsis in the moment that also foreshadows the impending assassination of Zia-ul-Haq in the novel. Interestingly, *CEM* itself opens proleptically, with Ali self-proclaiming his role in

the dictator's death, while he derides the concept in his conversation with Obaid towards the end of the novel. Similarly, the end of *OLAB* is magical realist and highly postmodern. However, in his interview with Mushtaq Bilal, Hanif denies that this ending is magical realist; he says, rather ingeniously, that the ending is "an experiment to end a novel. It is as banal as that" (123). What Wendy Faris argues about Toni Morrison and, by implication, several others, can therefore be applied to Hanif too: "a writer may dislike the label of magical realism while using its techniques" which "does not erase its [magical realism's] presence from a text" nor "prevent the inclusion of a text in the mode" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 179). One might then argue that in terms of both his political concerns, and his literary lineage, Hanif fits within the magical realist tradition while also differing from it.

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The vein of perennial violence is common ground among *CEM*, *OLAB*, and *Red Birds*, and other prominent works of magical realist fiction. These works cannot be read devoid of the ethical underpinnings of magical realism either, wherein such violent, disrupted histories can only be expressed through the excessive and the outrageous couched as the ordinary. Maggie Ann Bowers suggests that magical realism is "often employed by writers where the horror of actual events has exceeded what is considered to be ordinary experience" or an event that is "excessively traumatic" (579). Perez and Chevalier summarize magical tropes as "a critical and imaginative response to multigenerational traumas of colonialism, war, sexual violence, and forced migration" (14). In his conversation with Bilal, Hanif says about *OLAB* that "[w]e turn victims into martyrs although they might not have wanted to become martyrs. They are victims of our everyday casual brutality, but sometimes we say that somebody has sacrificed their life for a great cause and they are heroes and martyrs" (123-24). This sentiment dovetails into Bowers's imbrication of cultural/communal trauma and magical realism: "[t]rauma goes beyond what can be processed by any usual emotional response, while magical realism breaks the limits of what is conventionally regarded as imaginative representation" (579). Alice's supposed ascension to heaven in *OLAB* and Zainab's curse bearing fruit in *CEM* and bringing down a dictatorship without lifting a finger can be read as symptoms of traumatized persons (representative of the community of women) who have recourse only to such paths to help cope with their unceasing oppression.

Muneeza Shamsie points out that in Pakistan, under the 1961 Family Laws Ordinance, which was authored primarily by Pakistani women activists, clauses were introduced to discourage polygamy, regulate divorce procedures, and introduce a minimal marriageable age for women. However, in 1979, under the martial law of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, who is lampooned in *CEM*, the Hudood Ordinance was introduced, which, among other things, equated rape and adultery as part of its

efforts to “Islamise” Pakistani society. Similarly, “[n]ew blasphemy laws also came into being; both were used to victimise the weakest and most vulnerable—women and minorities” (xiii).⁶ It is precisely this institutionalized oppression that Hanif exposes through the figure of Blind Zainab in *CEM*. As in the novel, women’s organizations did oppose such moves in the 1980s, but the political will to undo the harms of Islamization has so far been weak. Shamsie rues that while “there has been constant pressure from liberals and journalists in Pakistan to rescind the discriminatory laws passed in the name of religion [...] no government, elected or otherwise, has done so for fear of alienating Pakistan’s clerics”, making it one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women. Furthermore, “[a]s lawlessness spread, *ancient tribal customs were confused with religion, the killing of women in the name of honour increased, and a parallel system of justice, the village ‘jirga’ ensured further victimisation*” (xix; emphasis mine). The system of honour killing, or working out family honour or economics on/through women’s bodies is highlighted in *OLAB* as well. As a nurse, Alice comes across women every day who suffer tremendously at the hands of the men around them:

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During her house job she worked in Accidents and Emergencies for six months and there was not a single day—not a single day—when she didn’t see a woman shot or hacked, strangled or suffocated, poisoned or burnt, hanged or buried alive. Suspicious husband, brother protecting his honour, father protecting his honour, son protecting his honour, jilted lover avenging his honour, feuding farmers settling their water disputes, money-lenders collecting their interest: most of life’s arguments, it seemed, got settled by doing various things to a woman’s body. (*OLAB* 96)

Blind Zainab’s story predates, but is indicative of, this state of affairs as she is, in *CEM*, the first woman in Pakistan sentenced to death by stoning under General Zia’s new laws because she was raped, and, being blind, could neither identify her rapists nor produce four Muslim men as witnesses. The bulk of the narrative is a satire of General Zia-ul-Haq’s person and regime, told in third-person narrative, and is a political potboiler that begins and ends with Ali Shigri (a first-person narrator), a young Air Force officer out to assassinate the General who, Ali believes, had his father killed and staged it to look like a suicide. The narrative also brings into focus American neo-imperialism and its role in fomenting political unrest, including supporting dictatorships, in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Blind Zainab’s story is but a minor subplot, featured in only two chapters, in the macro-history of the dictator and the nation-state. Nevertheless, it is her curse, fulfilled by a crow, that causes the crash of the airplane, resulting in the death of not one but many of the nation’s oppressors.

When deconstructing the dictator and his reign, Hanif’s prose shines through the darkly comic. For instance, the narrator comments that Zia has banished from his life *everything* that interrupted his ablutions: “garlic, lentils, women who didn’t cover their heads properly” (*CEM* 101). Another such instance is a deliberately saucy photograph that, having somehow escaped the strict censoring eye of the Minister of

Information, appears in a daily. The photograph is of Zia ogling a Western journalist's breasts. The hypocrisy of patriarchy and religious orthodoxy is focalized in the First Lady's reaction:

And then, there was her husband, the Man of Truth, the Man of Faith, the man who lectured women on piety on prime-time TV, the man who had fired judges and television newscasters who refused to wear a dupatta on their heads, the man who made sure that two pillows could not be shown together on an empty bed in a television drama, the man who made cinema owners blot out any bare legs or arms of actresses from the film posters; the same man was sitting there staring at these globes of white flesh with such single-mindedness that it seemed as if his own wife had been born without a pair. (117)

Through an exchange between Zia and his legal advisor, ninety-year-old Qadi from Saudi Arabia, the reader gains a glimpse of how Pakistani society turned so deeply patriarchal, bolstered by problematic interpretations of law and justice by men of religion. What Warnes says about *Satanic Verses* becomes true here as well: such narratives are fictional critiques "of the ways power serves its own interests by generating consensus about the nature of being and reality" (98). Zia refers to Blind Zainab as the "accused" who claims she was "forced to fornicate." Qadi is of the opinion that rape cannot occur unless at least five men are present to hold down a woman's limbs and rape her, and that women "always make this excuse after they are caught fornicating." The woman, Qadi says, is expected to identify at least three of the five men even if she is blind. He then elaborates that if the raped woman is married, "her husband will have to establish in the court that she is of good character and then we'll need four male Muslims of sound character who have witnessed the crime." Since rape, according to him is "a very serious crime, circumstantial evidence wouldn't do [...] witnesses will be required to have witnessed the actual penetration. And if the woman is not married she'll have to prove that she was a virgin before this horrible crime was committed" (174-76). The only logical rebuttal to this comes from the First Lady, but goes unanswered: "But how is this woman supposed to prove that she is a virgin if a bunch of men banged her for three days and three nights?" (176)

CEM could also be classified as satirical magical realism, albeit with some reservations, given how the magical interrupts the real not continuously but only sporadically and only towards the end. An important feature of satiric magical realism is "the employment of the shocking tactic of incorporating horrific detail of historical events in a novel where the satire has been built upon humorous exaggeration and farce" (Bowers 583). This is a key element of Hanif's writing, in which the bathetic and ludic are frequently juxtaposed with extreme and offhand violence. The dictator is presented as a clownish, puffed-up, delusional, and paranoid man, which takes some of the sting out of his reign. If satirical magical realism aims to mock and ridicule political despots, then CEM is certainly an instance of it. For Bowers, an important feature of satirical magical realism is its ability to create "intercultural and international connections" since satire relies on the local/the actual historical event but makes this event recognizable to a global audience (577). Many satirical magi-

cal realist texts act as a “chilling reminder of the repetition and similarity of certain kinds of political malpractice that have lead [sic] to a shared sense of trauma across the globe: election rigging; corruption; nepotism; embezzlement; removal of opposition; imprisonment for political ends and torture” (578). In that sense, *CEM* can be read as a tale of all despots; incidentally, the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and Osama Bin Laden both have cameo roles in the novel.

Zainab appears much later in the narrative, which is primarily occupied by the male characters, Zia and Ali. She is far removed from the political intrigue of these and other characters, and is full of faith, kindness, and fortitude. Being blind and illiterate, she learns about the world “from smells, birds, textures of the wind” (209). Her “affinity to the natural world” (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 210) is exemplified in the birds she feeds every day; on that particular day, she feeds a crow that has settled near the window of the cell in which she is imprisoned because she has been raped. The narrator mentions the old superstition that “if a crow hears a curse from someone who has fed him to a full stomach”, it is compelled to carry out that curse (*CEM* 214). A few moments later, the usually placid Zainab curses an unnamed man (Zia) who has ordered that she be taken away from her jail cell where she has made friends, and moved to another jail, an old fort’s dungeons, so that she may no longer speak to the press. She utters the words: “May worms eat the innards of the person who is taking me away from my home. May his children not see his face in death” (214). Zia, thus cursed, is fated to die because the crow, now fully fed, has heard the curse. The narrative, however, immediately also undermines the power of curses, which are “the last resort of frustrated mothers and useless weapons for people who do not even have the courage or vocabulary to come up with proper invective for their enemies. It is also a well-known fact that most curses don’t work” (214). Such scepticism from the perspective of the realist narrator only heightens the effect when the curse is eventually fulfilled.

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Towards the end of the novel, and close to the day of the assassination, various agents have lined up their devices in a comic case of overkill. Zia’s body is playing host to tapeworms; Ali has a sword tip dipped in krait poison and has managed to scratch Zia with it during a silent sword drill; an ambitious political rival, General Akhtar, has installed poisonous VX gas in the air conditioning duct of the Presidential airplane; the All Pakistan Mango Farmers Cooperative have sent crates of mangoes as a gift for the President and his friends, and the crates possibly have a bomb as retaliation for one of Zia’s men killing their Secretary General for sport. Unfortunately, Akhtar finds himself on the plane with Zia and instructs the pilot not to turn on the air conditioning. However, and against all odds, including a “Code Red” security level imposed because of Zia’s increasing paranoia, the crow, driven by the force of the curse, ends up hurtling through the engine of the airplane, “spins with the intake cycle and is sucked into a side duct; his tiny shriek is drowned out by the roar of the engine” (357). This causes the pressure in the plane to drop and the air conditioning automatically switches on, releasing VX gas and killing the pilots and passengers

in the ensuing crash. What is important here is that it is Zainab's curse that causes the death not only of Zia-ul-Haq, the man responsible for incarcerating her, but also others, including the American ambassador, who have indirectly aided the dictator's cause.

If the crow fulfilling a curse is a 'pagan' superstition of doubtful efficacy, so is General Zia's belief that the presence of the Quran in the airplane adds an additional layer of security (307), as is the belief that the guards posted everywhere will save him. By bringing in the motif of the crow and the curse, the narrative makes room for other belief systems and faiths to be treated at par with organized/state religion and modernity. This "retelling" of a historical event obviously also plays up the fact that little is known about the plane crash in public records. However, as mentioned above, the curse has no redemptive powers, and has no positive effect on Zainab's life. The narrative leaves her fate unresolved: she is likely unaware of this monumental event, and we last see her languishing in her solitary dungeon in an old fort-prison.

- 144** CEM is filled with descriptions of violence—verbal and physical torture especially—in prisons and secret interrogation chambers. Ali, Obaid, and myriad other characters have passed through those blood-spattered walls, left bruised, broken, or dead. Hanif is especially adept at throwing in casual references to violence to make it appear normal. For instance, "domestic cruelty and *Baywatch*" are what an officer is looking forward to after a day spent torturing prisoners (21). Such banal but horrific violence is plentiful in *OLAB* as well. Violence in interrogation techniques by the police is prominent, as is sexual violence towards women in the domestic and public spheres.

Alice Bhatti, the eponymous heroine of *OLAB*, is not merely a woman in an unjust hyper-patriarchal society. Her identity as a woman is also intersected by two other very crucial axes: she is a Christian, and hence a minority in a Muslim-majority country,⁷ and a *Choohra*, a so-called lower-caste person whose traditionally designated job was sweeping and cleaning, and in the hierarchy of castes—a legacy of Hinduism that has carried on among converted Christians—is treated as untouchable by many of the so-called upper castes. Alice, therefore, is disempowered in more than one way. In the opening pages, as she interviews for the job of a junior nurse at the Sacred Heart Hospital, which is run by Christians, she recalls her father saying, "'These Muslas will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink,' [...] 'And our own brothers at the Sacred? They will educate you and then ask you why you stink'" (1). Along with this caste discrimination, she has also realized that "cutting up women is a sport older than cricket but just as popular and equally full of obscure rituals and intricate rules" (95-96). Like Dalit women across India and Pakistan, Alice is almost constantly a victim of caste and gendered violence, suffers from poverty and lack of resources, and ultimately slips between the cracks in the legal and justice system. However, unlike Zainab, Alice has a far more complex relationship with her faith and society: "Her twenty-seven-year-old body is a compact little war zone where competing warriors have trampled and left their marks. She has fought back often enough,

with less calibrated viciousness maybe, [...] but she has never accepted a wound without trying to give one back” (174).

Alice’s life is crisscrossed, directly and indirectly, by fourfold violence. Casual sexual violence occurs at the hospital and on the streets: “Lewd gestures, whispered suggestions, uninvited hands on her bottom are all part of Alice Bhatti’s daily existence” (9). She is also subjected to the violence of caste, through gestures, assumptions, segregation, and casteist slurs. Violence is perpetrated by the rich on the poor, such as the murder of Alice’s mother, reported as an accidental death, at the hands of her rich employer, who possibly also raped her. And there is state-sanctioned violence, personified in the form of Inspector Malangi and the notorious extra-judicial police organization called the G-Squad (sardonically standing for Gentlemen’s Squad), Teddy Butt (her husband), as well as her and her friend Noor’s time in prison, where corporal punishment, sodomy, and molestation are par for the course. Under this shadow of violence, Alice negotiates her way until her untimely death at the hands of Teddy.

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Rajeswari Sunder Rajan states that in India “most cases of reported rapes are instances of what we might call institutional rape, rape perpetrated by members of repressive state forces like the police or the army, or groups like landlords, upon helpless women of the oppressed classes, often when the women are in custody in police cells or bound by contracts of bonded labour” (73). While her comment is about India specifically, it would not be incorrect to extend it to sexual and gendered violence in general perpetrated by repressive state forces across the world. Inspector Malangi and his G-Squad, a motley crew of “reformed rapists (*I have got three grown-up daughters now, you know*), torturers (*it’s a science, not an art*), sharpshooters (*monkeys really, as we spend half our lives perched on rooftops and trees*)” (14) have no qualms torturing and executing whoever they believe is a criminal or simply inconvenient. Raping women in police custody or during an interrogation is a regular activity (65). For these G-Squad men, violence and benevolence are natural extensions of each other. Teddy, for instance, cannot explain to Alice “that in his line of work, kindness and cruelty are badly mixed up. *Have you eaten? Eat some more. Now die*” (142). This is similar to Teddy’s inability to differentiate between romantic love and terrorizing the *object* of his affection, reflected in many popular films and songs of India and Pakistan. Teddy, who is Malangi’s loyal Man Friday, carries out all manner of chores from tracking down rumoured criminals to talking to them in their last moments and removing their possessions after they are executed; he is “a crime-scene cleaner, comforter, errand boy, towel holder, cheerleader, doorstopper, gun-cleaner, replacement court witness, proxy prisoner, fourth card player, but more importantly a companion to people who have been caught but not yet killed, a companion for the passengers on their last journey” (100-01). This list of Teddy’s jobs for the G-Squad is indicative not only of his filial devotion to Malangi but also of the blurred lines between the legal and illegal, the kind and the cruel.

The sexual violence Alice faces peaks when a rich old dying woman’s son forces

Alice to perform fellatio in the “VIP ward” of the hospital. When she refuses, he slaps her. Alice calmly injures the man’s penis with a razor blade. This act of self-defence, which the men in the story interpret as defiance, will ultimately be the cause of her death. The powerful family puts pressure on Malangi to take revenge rather than file a police complaint, and Malangi uses Teddy’s devotion towards him and his (Teddy’s) disgruntlement with Alice—who has left him after discovering she is pregnant and cannot bear the thought of raising a child with her husband whose job entails such violence—to fatally burn her with sulphuric acid. Teddy himself sees no contradiction in hurting his wife when Malangi compares women to horses gone mad: “What do you do when everything fails? They need to be put down. For their own good. There is no other way” (208). For him, punishing the woman is for her own good, and Malangi convinces Teddy that if he loves her, he must punish her for leaving him (210). According to Malangi, disfiguring her with acid “is the only thing that’ll hurt as much as love hurts” (211). Alice’s and Teddy’s courtship, which began with “gun-point poetry” (61), ends thus.

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It appears that Alice also has supernatural abilities, though the narrative continuously undermines their use, value, and veracity. One power that Alice claims to possess is that she can predict a person’s death just by looking at them. She recalls that in her own case, she can only see a disfigured face in the mirror covered with ice cubes (7): “It’s not me, it’s not even a human face. It’s a ghoul. I get frightened” (42). In this case, the premonition is obviously proven true. Roanne L. Kantor has suggested that the use of magical realism amid such stark violence, such as in *OLAB*, is to “affect defamiliarization—reawakening audiences to the everyday violence of contemporary life in the Global South through the unexpected intervention of ‘irreducible magic’” (96). Defamiliarization primarily refers to “different regimes of truth-telling—religious, juridical, bureaucratic” (96), effected through “subtle games of belief and disbelief, faith and irreverence” (Warnes 86). In Alice’s case, this defamiliarization is effected by a (supposed) miracle she causes. While Alice is sardonic about stories of Church-sanctioned miracles such as lame people walking, and wonders why there are no really useful miracles such as drains remaining unclogged (*OLAB* 115), she herself unwittingly becomes the agent of a miracle when a stillborn baby comes back to life under her ministrations and her praying to “Yassoo” with “demented devotion” (166). Just as the narrative equates Sister Hina Alvi’s proclamation of the baby’s death based on medical knowledge and Alice’s magical ability to predict the kind of death, it also does not resolve if the baby’s coming back to life is a result of a delayed physiological reaction or of Alice’s prayers. The hospital, however, is a ripe space for news of miracles to proliferate, and desperate patients and their families look at her as “a messiah who has forsaken her right to a regular lunch break” (168). The miracle, however, is couched in logical terms:

The sweeper will tell everyone that he felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. In reality he reached that conclusion by using logic. When he is down on his knees, he realises that the dead baby come alive is a miracle, but there is this other person [Alice] who has made

the miracle possible. (186)

Alice herself has no faith in this so-called miracle and knows that these are “mostly the result of a non-literal implementation of the working nurse’s manual, sometimes applied with a bit of inspired improvisation, half a Prozac added there, an antibiotic deleted from another prescription, but mostly a generous helping of disinfectant” (187). Such devaluation of miracles is set up against the belief of “the really needy ones who can’t afford to lose hope” (186).

The novel ends with Alice’s murder at the hands of her husband, but the epilogue, an open letter by her father, Joseph Bhatti, to the Vatican, is an appeal to canonize her based on the medical miracles she wrought when she was alive and on her ascension to heaven upon her death. The letter displays high political acuity with respect to caste biases and has a postmodernist bent. What are significant here are the justification and obviousness of the magical, and Joseph Bhatti’s arguments that juxtapose realism and the miracle, as well as hegemonic ideas of (Western) Christianity and locally-appropriate(d) religious symbolism. Additionally, there is also the critical matter of the record of memories, which are in danger of disappearing almost as soon as they appear.

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Joseph Bhatti claims that in the moments before Alice’s death, the Holy Virgin and the infant, who was “making a ruckus,” had appeared over the Sacred Heart hospital, and she had beckoned Alice “to join her on the throne” (223). He claims this magical event was heralded by other omens such as a patient in the ICU complaining that all he could smell were roses, an IV drip turning to milk, and the shabby cross outside the hospital beginning to glow (224). However, not much else matches the acceptable image of ascension in Christianity. Since the “throne [is] held aloft by a flock of peacocks” (224) and surrounded by kites, the local Diocese Committee to Investigate the Miracle “concluded immediately that a holy apparition accompanied by scavenging birds like kites must be either the work of the devil or a deliberate attempt to bring an already beleaguered Catholic Church into disrepute” or “some Choohra folklore emanating from French Colony that was being projected as the work of the Holy Spirit” (225). Caste discrimination is tied in with race when Joseph Bhatti draws a sly parallel with Mother Teresa, also a nurse, who was canonized, and claims it was only because she was white while Alice is not, and is from a lower caste (226, 230). He claims that upper-caste Christians are “devotees of the Hindu goddess Kali” (226), pointing to the ancestry and complicated history of caste and conversion in the Indian subcontinent. He accuses the committee of questioning Alice’s character because of her caste. Why, the Committee had objected, was the Holy Mother revealed to “a junior nurse of questionable character” rather than “a Catholic from a good churchgoing family and of good education”? She is pilloried as a “penis-slasher” who had left her husband “and was living in sin with another woman, a senior nurse [Sister Hina Alvi], and that the two of them planned to raise a bastard child as husband and wife” (227). The child in question is the miracle baby who had come back to

life. The miracle in which the patients at the hospital believed so ardently is precisely the one used to malign Alice in death.

The postmodernist element of unreliability of truth is exemplified in the dialogue of reiteration by Joseph Bhatti, and dismissal by the Committee, of all testimonies of those few moments. The first witnesses to the miracle were the patients in the psychiatric ward, but their testimony is dismissed because they are Muslim and mad. Dr John Malick's testimony is dismissed because he is deemed a perpetual drunk and a corrupt professional. Joseph Bhatti claims the existence of a photograph which the Committee has deliberately lost: "they claim they saw it, but, since they weren't sure of its authenticity, it was sent to the Colorado Institute of Authentication of Pictures and Symbols and was lost in the mail." The photo, as per records, was of a "peacock, its wings stretched upwards, and framed in it was a head shot of Alice Bhatti as if she was dressed for a fancy-dress party" (228). He also claims that immediately after Alice's ascension, a fat legless beggar began to walk and skateboard, and a Toyota Surf, likely belonging to the VIP family that was hounding Alice, was found floating (229). However, these testimonies are evaporating as quickly as they are recorded: "All of the seventeen people who saw the apparition couldn't bear to watch the face of the apparition on the throne because it was so luminous [...] It was only the mad skater who claimed that a gust of wind blew in her direction and unveiled the face for a moment and that She looked like a ghoul" (230)—hearkening back to Alice's own vision of her death. The Committee, a bureaucratic, official, and empowered body, and Joseph Bhatti's claims are thus locked in perpetual argument.

The letter can be read as a traumatised father's desperate attempt to make sense of his daughter's horrible death by asking those in power to recognize a magical event so that the tragedy is not in vain. It can be read as a sharp critique of the caste system as it persists in Christianity. And it is also a postmodernist comment on the nature of language and memory, particularly when he asks, "what did people see that night?" (230). Amidst all this doubt, Joseph Bhatti's only desire is to "tell the complete story of Alice Bhatti, her birth and suffering and marriage and miracles associated with her, and then leave it to the people to decide whether she deserves to be recognised as Our Lady of Alice Bhatti" (231). With this, Hanif draws in the reader not as a passive recipient of the text but an active agent who must decide how Alice's story (and the stories of the many women similarly harmed) must be remembered.

The closing lines hearken back to the opening of the novel, when Alice is being interviewed at the Sacred Heart. This cyclical narrative, also used in *CEM*, reminds us that in spite of the potential of magic to challenge the realist version of events, the cycle of violence perpetrated on women remains unbroken. Nevertheless, magical realism opens up a space to counter this oppression to some measure, and to make the reader privy to the unofficial, undocumented *petit-histoire*.

RUMOUR AND THE INSTABILITY OF MEANING

The psycho-social history of the nation and community is traced through generations of violent behaviour in *CEM* and *OLAB*. For instance, Teddy's father was an abusive man who kept his wife virtually a prisoner. It was rumoured that he had cut off the ears of women during the partition to steal their gold earrings. Alice's mother died at her place of work, the house of a rich man. The narrative employs considerable ambiguity to describe the exact circumstances of her death and the tragedy is focalized through twelve-year-old Alice:

It's entirely conceivable that if you are washing travertine marble with soapy water you can skip and crack your skull, you can die. When He wants to take you, He can make the marble staircase slippery [...] But it is not very likely that when you slip on that staircase you'll also accidentally scratch yourself on your left breast with such violence that those who wash your body will see four parallel sharp gashes drawn with human nails [...] There were rumours that Reverend Philip had accepted a gift of ten thousand rupees on Joseph Bhatti's behalf to stop the autopsy [...] But the truth is that even those who believed this rumour—or maybe even started this rumour—didn't believe for a moment that the owners of the house with a marble staircase of that size would let any hook sink into them. (*OLAB* 119)

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A gardener from that house who came for the funeral was “muttering something in Bengali”, and the mourners heard him saying either “murder, murder, murder” or “martyr, martyr, martyr” (120). These can be read as instances of individual memory or a collective lineage, available only through informal channels, that continue to perpetuate certain attitudes and fates. Jasbir Jain states that violence “has no time limits, it survives through time, travels through generations, leads to a haziness where values are concerned. One is not necessarily brutal, but one loses the ability to distinguish between the good and the bad, right and wrong, loyalty and betrayal” (224). Could this be a way to decode characters such as Teddy, Zia, and Malangi? Are they terrible individuals or representative products of a problematic history and culture?

It is vital to recognize that the psycho-social history of these individuals or entire communities, as exemplified above, is not officially documented history. Hanif's narratives rely heavily on the language of rumour to de-establish both the magical and the realist. The magical, such as Alice's ascension, is voiced through rumour, but so is a 'realist' event like her wedding to Teddy. The equal unreliability of narrative, records, and memories about the realist and the magical serves the purpose of disrupting any notion of a fixed or singular truth. The subterranean existence of the magical and the disbelief of the dominant in it also avoids the jejune belief that magic can resolve such deeply rooted rot.

Rumour is an important aspect of delegitimizing positivist history-telling and realism, and points to the instability of truth. As mentioned earlier, it can serve to foment unrest but also to interrupt dominant narratives. By nature oral and unof-

ficial, it makes visible that which would otherwise remain absent. Bowers finds a natural affinity between magical realism and rumour:

The exaggeration of imaginative elements in magical realism, satire, and rumor complicates the association with actuality as it presents to us an alternative realism that is truthful but not necessarily mimetic. We are asked to believe beyond our referential world—yet these three modes require our recognition of the connection between the fiction and the actual world to which it refers. (587)

Magical realism unearths the many layers of memory, lived experiences, and narratives that govern oppressed people's existence and brings them all together. The conventional magical realist narrator gives the reader no recourse for doubt; the reader is not at liberty to push the magical out of the fictional heterocosm by labeling it a dream sequence, a hallucination, or an irrational aberration conjured up by individual or mass psychosis. In other words, magical realism demands the reader's complete faith in the events and their narration.

- 150 However, do Hanif's narratives and characters actually enable such an unwavering equal belief? I argue that the characters and narrators in his fictional worlds are themselves half-believing, half-sceptical of the magical and the real, treating both as equally unbelievable. The novels contest the reader's unstinting belief in realism by the irruptions of magical explanations, while also contesting the magical reality of these worlds by stitching doubt within the narrative itself. In this sense, though their genealogy may be traced to the early theorization of magical realism, the two novels depart in many crucial ways from it.

CONCLUSION

The ethical and political import of magical realism is that it offers "alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts," (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 170) because the official account is almost always biased and rarely commensurate with the multi-layered memory of local or peripheral groups. In order to reorient history, magical realism invokes elements from folklore, from supernatural and unnatural interpretations, and unconventional belief systems, and even from anthropological accounts, thereby (re)creating new strands of "collective memory" (170).

Mohammed Hanif's two novels discussed here are magical realist in their ethical bent and narrative style, and postmodernist in their use of the ludic and through their irreverential attitudes towards singular truths, official narratives, and state machinery. They are also strongly rooted in a specific culture and history, and this context must be kept in sight even as the reader may extrapolate elements of right-wing majoritarianism, dictatorships, toxic masculinity and patriarchy, state-supported violence, and the oppression of women and lower-caste communities—all of which often go hand in hand—to other locations globally. Mariano Siskind avers that "[g]enres and texts belong to world literature not because of what they *are* but

rather because of what they *do*: because they perform global desires, because they further transcultural goals, and because they resist the immediacy of meaning as a function of the local, whether national or regional” (25). This is indeed borne out by Hanif’s narratives.

The presence of magical realism creates a space for trauma to be articulated, however outrageous it may seem to the realist. This is especially appropriate when reality is unbearable itself. However, the narratives also present an equal and great degree of doubt towards both the realist and the magical. Like those of Rushdie, Hanif’s narratives offer “not an escape from history, but the contrary, an engagement with reality that seeks to defamiliarize the usual terms on which discourse about history, culture and identity is founded” (Warnes 102). The history of relentless violence towards women, imploded with magical realism, provides a different, though barely hopeful, version of events. Magical realism in *CEM* and *OLAB* does not provide fanciful and unrealistic potential for an overnight feminist revolution, nor it is necessarily a celebration of a mythico-history of the region; rather, the magical is an irruption into positivist and realist narrative acts, so that the histories and experiences of the oppressed may own some of the very same narrative space. If magic is “a trope of the capacity of language to cross an uncrossable border, enter the world, and rewrite it” (Bényei 174), Hanif’s novels rewrite the lived experiences of the women of Pakistan whose identities are shaped as much by their gender as their class, religion, caste, and attendant physical, sexual, and emotional traumas.

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NOTES

1. Rushdie is the only noteworthy South Asian postcolonial magical realist writer addressed in Christopher Warnes’s *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*. This is also the case in Zamora and Faris’s definitive anthology *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Similarly, though she ostensibly discusses magical realism in South Asian Anglophone fiction, Roanne L. Kantor focuses primarily on Rushdie and on literary movements in pre- and post-independence India. Towards the end she does mention Zulfikar Ghose and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, as well as Hanif’s first two novels, but concludes that “prominent Pakistani fictions of the 2000s seem almost totally untouched by magical realism” (95). I suggest this is true of Indian writing in English as well.
2. Meenakshi Bharat argues that the novel is a particularly fertile literary medium that grapples with terrorism in all its aspects (especially in the wake of 9/11) including exploring the mind of someone who resorts to terror. She terms the post-9/11 novels on the subject “post-terrorist” because this genre “identifies, problematises and analyses terror and terrorism to throw up a key to understanding the overall cultural make-up of the times” (80). She lists *CEM*, along with Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, H.M. Naqvi’s *Homeboy*, and Nadeem Aslam’s *A Wasted Vigil* as post-terrorist novels from Pakistan. All of these novels feature a common thread of the “broken, battered individuals” who react in ways that may be deemed terrorist but the narratives reach beyond into history and the present to find reasons for such reactions (81).
3. Since this article focuses on violence along the axis of gender and caste within Pakistan, Hanif’s *Red Birds* is outside the scope of this discussion. *Red Birds* is set in an unnamed desert refugee camp, and its alternating first-person narratives of Momo, Ellie, Mutt (a dog), other characters, and ghosts lay bare the devastation of war, death, grief, and dehumanization on all sides. It also fits easily within

the magical realist aesthetic and politic, but is located outside of Pakistan, and it explores war and its aftermath more than it does women oppressed through sociocultural institutions within the nation-state. *Red Birds* can be read as political satire, like *CEM*. It does not, however, align itself as closely to specific local/regional issues as do *CEM* and *OLAB*.

4. In the 1960s and 1970s, the USA's influence was extremely malignant in Pakistan, "where the dreaded local spy agency, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), first acquired its malign power as a conduit between the CIA and anti-communist jihadists." Zia-ul-Haq, "Pakistan's American-funded military dictator, steadily silenced all democratic opposition and empowered Islamic extremists in the nine years between 1979, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, and his death in a plane crash in 1988" (Mishra 105). *CEM* is, among other things, a sharp critique of American neo-imperialism and the USA's interference in Pakistan and Afghanistan for decades, and its continued role in pumping up the arms race, promoting Islamophobia, and keeping these regions in a state of destabilization, just short of complete implosion. The narratives do not exonerate internal political power struggles either.
5. A psycho-social history is one whose inclusion of supernatural events and magical occurrences leads to the limits of realism and positivistic historiography and representation being "flagrantly transgressed." Thus, it is indicative of the "boundaries of a positivistic historiographic practice" (Warnes 90).
6. In nations such as Pakistan, the ideology of majoritarianism divides the citizenry into natural citizens, such as Muslims in Pakistan or Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka, and those that are under the protection of these natural citizens, such as Hindus in Pakistan or Tamils in Sri Lanka; the latter are referred to as the minority (Kesavan 168).
7. Hanif explains why Sister Hina Alvi, a character in *OLAB*, is a closeted Christian in Pakistan, a reaction to increasing intolerance towards minorities across religious, tribal, and regional lines: "Obviously, if you have a Muslim name, you are secure in Pakistan. If you have a Sunni-Muslim name, you are even securer. If you are a Baloch young man, your average age is reduced by half automatically. Many Christians over the past forty, fifty years have given their children Muslim names so that they won't have to give their identity so easily" (Bilal 125).

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