



Demystifying the Magic in Diamond Shumsher's *Seto Bagh*: History Reconsidered

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Abstract

Diamond Shumsher's masterpiece, Seto Bagh, is a significant historical novel in Nepali literature. The novel made a vibrant debut in depicting historicity in fictional prose in the Nepali context. In particular, the reconsideration of the portrayal of history from a new perspective is relevant. Traditionally, this is considered a historical realist novel. Nevertheless, magical elements are profusely used in the novel. In this study, this niche opens up avenues to re-evaluate the historicity vis-à-vis magical elements. I have adopted Maggie Ann Bowers' and Wendy B. Faris's notions and perspectives on the theoretical lens of magical realism to demystify the magic and history in the text. Further, I have adapted the content analysis method to analyze the textual evidences from the selected novel. The main finding exhibits that the novelist has amalgamated historical facts with magical elements like supernatural beings and happenings. Thus, the novel is an example of historical magical realism. This implies that only established beliefs and theories are not sufficient to judge the literary works rightly. Therefore, new lenses should be explored to enter into the world of fictional prose works as such.

Keywords: History, historicity, magical realism, magical elements

Introduction

This article is an attempt to demystify the magic that has come vis-à-vis historicity in the novel *Seto Bagh*, authored by Diamond Shumsher. Before entering the core of this study, a brief account of the novelist and the novel is necessary for preparing a background for analysis. A renowned literary and political figure of Nepal, he was born as the youngest son of Buddha Shumsher Rana at the Tansen Palace in Palpa on July 4, 1918 when there was Rana Dynasty in Nepal. As a progeny of the Rana family, his life could be luxurious as other members were enjoying the power of the oligarchy. Although he completed his studies up to matriculation at home, he could not take the formal examination because of his father's death. Thus, his formal education was limited. However, his acquisition of in-depth knowledge and interest about William Shakespeare and contemporary literary personalities and literature from a home-imported English

literary scholar S. N. Benerjee from Calcutta became the starting point for Diamond's literary development. On the other hand, after the untimely demise of his father, he enlisted in the Nepal Army as a Lieutenant at the age of 20, and later retired as a Major (Lama). This shows that Diamond did not get a congenial atmosphere for formal education.

Like Bal Krishna Sama, a great Nepali dramatist, Shumsher was born and raised in the Rana clan but joined the armed revolution of the Nepali Congress as a political activist to end the Rana oligarchy. Similarly, like B.P. Koirala, Shumsher's political and literary aspects are visible. Although his political personality does not appear to be so strong and powerful, his literary personality has emerged as a historical novelist. After a formal study up to matriculation, he met Professor Anmesh Roy Chaudhary, under whose direction the former studied Western scholars such as Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, Walter Scott, Lord Byron, and Indian scholars such as Prem Chandra and Tagore (Gautam 56). As a result, he received unique energy for literary creation, which is reflected in his seven novels. During his six years in jail, he wrote *Seto Bagh* that got published in 1973. Later, it was translated into various languages like English, French, Japanese and Korean.

Out of the seven novels, *Seto Bagh* is an important work from various points of view such as historical, social, economic, educational, cultural, linguistic, artistic and so on (Gautam 71-96) and this masterpiece has made the novelist a real diamond. The next remarkable point about the novel is that it has been translated into several languages such as English, Hindi, Japanese, French, German and Korean (Neupane, *Diamond Shumsher Rana* 41). Further, the novel was selected for Nobel Prize and this is a great achievement for Nepali people and literature (41). Thus, it is relevant to re-examine this unique, invaluable and incomparable treasure of Nepali literature from the novel perspectives such as from the perspective of historicity and magic realism.

In the wave of other historical or similar-looking novels, the novel is considered to be of the highest rank. In the critics' observations, no novel of this style has ever been written about the height of the *Seto Bagh* (Pokhrel 111 and Rai 98). Similarly, the translator's foreword has mentioned that this is the most important historical novel of all time (Rana, *Wake of the White Tiger*). Therefore, this is one of the best historical novels. Further, the novel is full of magical elements like dreams, charms, spells, illusions and other supernatural beings and happenings. Hence, the novel not only comprises historicity but also magical realities. In this context, the purpose of this study is to re-evaluate the novel on the touchstones of historical magical realism.

Methodology

The main theoretical lens I have adopted in this study is historical magical realism that is characterized by the two schools of thought like historicity and magical realism. I employed historicity, using the ideas of Kate Grenville and magical realism, using the notions of Maggie Ann Bowers and Wendy B. Faris. Maggie Ann Bowers has conceded, "The variety of magical occurrences in magic(al) realist writing includes ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents, and strange atmospheres but does not include the magic as it is found in a magic show" (20). She has characterized magical realism as "mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic [...] miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories" (488). Likewise, Wendy B. Faris has added five distinctive traits in magical realism such as presentation of irreducible elements, the portrayal of supernatural events and settings, the readers' dilemma about the events to be true or not, integration of realistic with supernatural lives and events, disruption of the accepted truths (8, 14, 17, 21, 23).

Since this study aimed to assess *Seto Bagh* in light of magical realism, I analyzed the text with textual evidences and relevant critical insights from the critics and theorists. I reviewed the available archival materials and analyzed the contents to draw inferences. The archive materials included related books, journals, critical and investigative essays and even ideas expressed in interviews. The study concludes with the deliberations of the facts and information from these materials.

Unless otherwise mentioned, the textual citations are from the translated version of the selected novel that was accomplished by Greta Rana in the title *Wake of the White Tiger* in 1984. The term 'wake' is added to its original Nepali title to mean its Celtic origin. To put in the translator's words, "A wake is not simply a gathering of the clan at the lying of a chieftain; but a re-alignment of loyalties, a shifting of pledges from powerless factions to powerful ones" (1). This reflects the theme of the novel. Hence, the translator's title and the portrayal of the episodes are vivid.

Results and Discussion

Shumsher's *Seto Bagh*, which is a successful historical novel that appears as a sequel to *Basanti*, highlights the political, educational, social and cultural history of Nepal for 30 years: from 1854 to 1884, the period of oligarchic Rana rule. Many critics like Rajendra Subedi, Krishna Chandra Singh Pradhan and Indra Bahadur Rai have called it a historical realistic novel, but Govinda Raj Bhattarai considers the real entrance to this novel to be magical realism (292). Similarly, Nabaraj Neupane argues that it should be viewed as a historical magical realist novel (198). This is the baseline of deliberations of the novel in this article.

Historicity in Seto Bagh

The basis of a historical novel is history, but there is a difference between these two terms. In history, empty facts come or appear as archives, while in historical novels, themes and characters are taken from history and the events are presented in the colour of narrative (Grenville). In this way, the historical novel is related to the historical reality because the reality of yesterday is the past and the reality of today is the past of the future. Looking at the tradition of Nepali novel writing, the style of presenting events in a written artistic cover and decoration with history in focus is found in historical realistic novels (Pradhan 126; Subedi 332; Rai 98; and Pokhrel 214).

Among the various variations of the novel in the Western world, the historical novel does not only present, but also narrates historical characters and events (Abrams and Harpham 230). Thus, the historical novel is not just a mere account of a period in history but also a unique artistic expression woven of history and narrative elements. The remarkable novels of this kind in English literature are like Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), and Margaret Mitchell's *Go with the Wind* (1936), among others. Similarly, Nepali examples include Tukaraj Padmaraj Mishra's *Rajabandhaki* (1939) and *Ram Krishna Kunwar Rana* (1942), Mohan Bahadur Malla's *Mayarani* (1952), Khagendra K. C.'s *Khandan* (1978) and Srikrishna Shrestha's *Bhimsen Thapa* (2008) to mention but a few.

From this point of view, the historical truth and fictional elements are integrated into *Seto Bagh* in such a way that the general reader may not notice. Some of the historical characters presented in the novel are Jung Bahadur, Jagat Jung (Jung's eldest son), Dhirshamsher, Birshamsher, Ranoddip Singh, Surendra, Narendra, Dhanahajuri, Shahajyadi (King Surendra Shah's daughter, Trailokya, and Prithvi Birvikram. Similarly, the war between Nepal and Tibet, and various marriage issues like Jagatjung and

Shahajyadi, Birshamsher and Dhanahajuri, Trailokya and Jung Bahadur's eldest and middle daughter, and Narendra and Jang Bahadur's younger daughter are real events.

The death of Dhirshamsher by strangulation in 1938, the assassination of Jagat Jung and his brothers as well as his uncle and the fact that Birshamsher became the Prime Minister are historical facts of Nepal as mentioned in the selected novel. However, some of them do not seem to be truthful to history. For example, the showing of Bam Bahadur and Dhir Shamsheer of the same status, mentioning that Pandit Somnath went to the UK with Jung Bahadur, seeing the Sino-Nepal War in 1788 and 1792, and raising the love affairs of some characters while they were still children that time (Gautam 74). In this way, *Seto Bagh*, which has an abundance of both history and fictitious writing, is a novel of the historical realistic stream. However, in different parts of the novel, there are full connections of imagination, dreams, illusions, witchcraft, and superstitions. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine this novel in the light of historicity and magical realism.

Magical Realism and Seto Bagh

In the 1920s, magic realism was introduced by a group of German surrealist painters like Karl Hoffer, Franz Radziwill and Max Beckmann in the field of painting. When it came to the technique of writing prose, it became magical realism (Abrams and Harpham 232). The realism used in this technique extends to Aristotle's definition of the term that means 'art is a true imitation of life'. Later, it was said that the visible external world, which is perceived or known by the senses in human beings, is reality. While describing the human perception of the external world, there are various forms of realism, such as social realism, historical realism, idealistic realism, surrealism, mystical realism, mysticism and dreamy realism, among others. To put in Abrams and Harpham's words, "These writers weave [...] a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements, as well as with materials derived from myth and fairy tales" (232). Furthermore, Zeynep Inanc illustrates: "Magical realism, a literary mode, having the quality of amalgamating two oxymoronic concepts, magic and realism, has been luring the attention of many writers and critics [...] since the 1960s" (5). Thus, as an off-shoot of realism, magical realism is a tool of evaluating fictional prose works.

The word 'magical' is related to allegory, surrealism, self-imagination and the word that goes wrong with science fiction (Bhattarai 292-295). The differences between them need to be examined minutely but I want to focus on magical realism as an analytical tool in this study. The events presented in it are difficult to distinguish between reality and mysticism (like illusions, dreams, and superstitions), which are materially accepted by the society of that time and cannot be scientifically proven. For Maggie Ann Bowers, "The variety of magical occurrences in magic(al) realist writing includes ghosts, disappearances, miracles, extraordinary talents, and strange atmospheres but does not include the magic as it is found in a magic show" (20). Similarly, some distinctive traits of magical realism subsume, "mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic [...] miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories" (488). Likewise, Wendy B. Faris has presented five attributes for the term such as presentation of irreducible elements, the portrayal of supernatural events and settings, the readers' dilemma about the events to be true or not, integration of realistic with supernatural lives and events, disruption of the accepted truths (8, 14, 17, 21, 23). Thus, magical realism fuses reality and the magical elements in such a way that reality sounds unreal and vice versa.

In such a theoretical perspective, Govinda Raj Bhattarai presents the following six bases while describing *Seto Bagh* from a magical realistic point of view: illusion and

reality, dream and reality, sorcery and reality, ghost and reality, destiny, superstition and reality, reincarnation, sinfulness, ghost and reality (292-295). There is certainly a magical reality in the analysis of examples and interpretations of all these points, but historicity has become integral. Historiography is not indispensable in magical realism, but since historicity has become an integral part of *Seto Bagh*, its true representation comes from historical magical realism.

The title "*Seto Bāgh*" itself comprises the elements of historiography and magical realism. *Seto bagh* (white tiger) does not exist in this world, but the novelist presents that Jung Bahadur saw it while he was hunting a tiger at Pattharghatṭa, a place of Nepal. In reality, he had not seen the white tiger, but it was just his illusion. Old Jung Bahadur had weak eyesight and thus he saw others coloured things white. The depiction of an illusion is parallel to Jung Bahadur's political decision, which indicates the role of succession to be prime ministers of Nepal to his brothers not to his sons. He could not notice murder, conspiracy and intrigues, adhered to his decision. He was self-deceived and so to pacify his soul, he went far from the centre of political activities (Dikshit, qtd. in Rana *Seto Bagh* ii).

The novel comprises several episodes, which have blended reality and magical elements in such a way that the common readers may not notice their differences. The excerpts discussed below exhibit a historic period that is the beginning phase of the Rana regime in Nepal. All the characters like Jagat Jung, the Princess Royal, and the events like Jang Bahadur's stay at Pattharghatta are truly historic. Nevertheless, the novelist has interwoven this historicity with his creative imagination seamlessly. The phenomenon has been illustrated in the succeeding sections.

The novelist has intermingled magical elements like dream, superstition, myth, illusion, sorcery, spell, charm, ghost, sin and religion with historiography imperceptibly. Excerpts 1 and 2 below display that common readers cannot demarcate reality with those magical elements.

1. The princess [...] fell asleep. [...] Jagat Jung would be there with a smile on his face and she would be frightened by his sudden appearance in the room. [...] He would embrace her warmly, hugging her close. [...] It was her princely dream! (23-24)

2. One night he dreamed of the Princess Royal [...] swiftly she stepped away from him, pulled out a khukuri and slashed her throat. [...] "How can love be sinful," she cried and then "Save me Jagat, I'm dying" and she fell into unconsciousness. He woke shaken, and sweating profusely. (31-32)

Even if there are not enough scientific proofs, the depictions show the reality that the then society considered them as real events. For example, the Nepali society at that time was not much educated and would believe in the existence of ghost, charm, spell and witch. They would also believe that these evil spirits and deeds would be the cause for their mis/fortune. This is evidence from excerpts 1 and 2, which have shown the blurring of the boundaries between dream and reality. The dreams and inner waves of the awakened characters (that can go into Jagat Jung's and the Princess Royal's thoughts and feelings) have been blurred in these episodes. Such events can occur in someone's inner waves of thoughts and feelings even at the awakening state of the being.

Similarly, in the excerpts 3 and 4, illusion and psychiatry are presented as real pictures.

3. He scrutinized the food on the golden dishes to see if he could ascertain if they were charmed or not. On the plate was fried partridge and in the bowl some

chicken soup. [...] Looking into the soup bowl, he saw a woman's face smiling at him and beckoning him on [...] and image slowly faded. (27)

4. "I saw a white tiger today [...] pure white, dazzling almost." The company with him began to speculate that may be the white tiger was a forest witch. A ghost, or a Goddess [...] The next day, those who had been with Jung on the hunting expedition fell ill with fever and stomach cramps. (147)

The characters in Jagat's mind are also seen in a golden bowl, and Jung Bahadur is blindfolded to see a tiger white, and falling ill after returning to the camp. All these events are illusory but are presented as if they were real. Just as it was an illusion to see a white tiger in Pattharghatta, so is an illusion to see a beautiful future of the Rana regime by arranging a succession of prime ministers to his brothers instead of his sons. He is also under the illusion that the people can be ruled by being dragged into the whirlpool of illiteracy and forced to wander in the darkness. Along with this, the superstitions, sorcery, myths, and ghosts presented in other excerpts 5-9 have also taken the form of reality in the novel and the flow of the novel has continued unabated.

5. His mind raced to remember a warning that he had received from well-wishers. "The Pandas of Kashi are trying to enslave your mind and heart. They have disembowelled black cats and boiled their hearts with Ganga water then casting a spell upon them they have sent them to Kathmandu. All this is meant to bewitch you. (26)

6. Accordingly, all the appropriate deities were appeased and numerous offerings were made along with numerous tantric invocations but none of it brought about any improvement in the Princess Royal's condition. (39)

7. Ghosts can't harm anyone in this palace. (41)

8. Hundreds of lights had flashed and flittered about the city throughout the night. Jagat had brushed them aside by telling his wife that they were simply ghosts carrying torches. (255)

9. "I can't, I swore before God that I wouldn't so how can I break such a promise, my conscience won't permit me." (199)

The excerpts from 5-9 demonstrate the depiction of the then society that had beliefs on supernatural beings like ghosts, spirits and deities; and supernatural happenings like tantric invocations, ghosts walking at night, and making promises before God. These magical elements are intermixed with real events without leaving any traces. For example, in Excerpt 5, Jagat Jung received a bowl of meat soup containing the Ganga Water and the black cats' intestines. This was sent by his beloved girl Princess Royal to enchant him. Likewise, in Excerpt 6, when the Princess was ill, all the related deities were appeased and offered, which were in vain. As portrayed in the novel, Princess seemed ill just because of the strong desire to marry Jagat Jung. Her inner illness could not be good by the outer trials. Despite this all, the novelists have intermingled reality with superstitious happenings. Further, the excerpts 7 and 8 deal with ghosts that are supposed to be wandering around the palace. Even Bir Shumsher's align's search of the Jung's factions with torches at night has been depicted as the ghosts carrying torches. Ultimately, Excerpt 9 displays the promise that was taken before God that cannot be broken. All these happenings exhibit that the magical elements are integrated with the realities in such a way that the realities seem unreal and vice versa.

Thus, the analysis of these excerpts make it clear that the characters and events of the novel are historical, adorned with illusory elements, and that these illusions have taken the form of reality. Further, the delineations confirm that this study is different from the previous studies like of Govinda Raj Bhattarai and Nabaraj Neupane, unlike which this is a holistic one that has presented the balanced views on the traditional

assumption of historicity and magical realism. Therefore, *Seto Bagh* is a historical magical realistic novel.

Conclusion

Shumsher's *Seto Bagh* is a novel based on historical facts about the time of Rana dynasty in Nepal that lasted for 104 years. However, various magical elements such as dreams, illusions, ghosts, sorcery, mythological contexts and superstitious realities are intermingled in such a way that the readers fall in dilemma whether the events and beings are true or not. These aspects, which fall under the basic elements of magical realism, have come together in this novel seamlessly. Magical reality has played a special role in popularizing the novel even though it is reinforced by the historical elements. The analysis of these aspects in the novel has helped to identify not only the history but also the folk culture of the Rana period in Nepal. Therefore, it is appropriate to place *Seto Bagh* in the category of historical magical realist novels. Accordingly, it is necessary to re-read and re-evaluate other novels written by Shumsher through the lens of historical magical realism.

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