

Magical Realism and Paranoia in Syed Manzoorul Islam's "The Ground Beneath Paritosh's Feet" and "The Merman's Prayer"

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Abstract

As far as literary genres are concerned, the relation between magical realism and paranoid fiction is diametrical. Magical realism demonstrates the supernatural elements in a mundane, secularistic fashion, without highlighting its apparent displacement. Conversely, paranoid fiction constantly forces the readers to question the reliability of the plot of a story, its characters and the storyteller as well. In short, magic realism renders the most intangible events earthly, while paranoid fiction makes a temporal situation elusive. Using two short stories — "The Ground Beneath Paritosh's Feet" and "The Merman's Prayer" — from Syed Manzoorul Islam's *The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories* (2013), this paper shows how employing paranoia as an agent arouses feelings of magical realism in the readers. In these stories, the writer aptly exhibits a perfect *mélange* of fairy tale elements as well as moments of abrupt shocks and inexplicable experiences. These stories constitute momentousness in a voluble language that produces a magical terrain where everything fantastical appears real. This paper proposes to present a detailed critique on how the elements of magical realism and paranoia are intertwined with each other in the mentioned stories. The authors draw references from dream interpretation, wish-fulfilment, psychosis and escapism to support their argument.

Keywords: Magical realism, paranoia, fairy tale elements, wish-fulfilment, escapism, dream

The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories (2013) is a compilation of English short stories by Syed Manzoorul Islam. All sixteen stories of the anthology are taken from different Bengali short story collections of the author, such as — *Alo O Ondhokar Dekhar Golpo* (2001), *Prem O Prarthonar Golpo* (2005), and translated by the author himself. Each story functions as a reminder of the unpleasant realities around us, which we systematically choose to overlook and remain oblivious of. The stories, through deft blending of supernatural and fairy tale elements, highlight how people are largely afflicted by the curse of poverty, superstition, sexual perversion, corruption, conservatism, and inner conflict. While commenting on the book, Basu (2014) calls it "one of those rare books that will keep the reader glued to the narrative till the end" and compared Islam's narrative style with S.T. Coleridge's. Islam himself, in an interview with the *Times of India* (2012), named two individuals in his childhood who had

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introduced him to the world of fairy tales and shaped him as a storyteller, one was his domestic house help, *Habib bhai*, and another old Hindu woman he used to call *Dadu*. Both of them used to narrate fairy tales to young Islam orally. Their fairy tales were always open-ended, where surrealistic elements were an integral part. As a child, however, he never questioned the surreal or supernatural elements their stories contained, rather later in his own stories, he effortlessly merged these fairy tale elements with reality. This paper examines these fantastical features in two specific stories — “The Ground Beneath Paritosh’s Feet” and “The Merman’s Prayer” by Islam, and to what extent paranoia plays a role in the development of these magical realist texts.

“The Ground Beneath Paritosh’s Feet” is a perfect amalgamation of paranoia and magical realist elements. The story was first published as “Poritosh Payer Nicher Mati” in the author’s *Alo O Ondhokar Dekhar Golpo*. In this story, the writer delineates a story of a faith-healer named Paritosh, and a woman named Rehana Banu who recently lost her baby during childbirth and is now devouring children in her dreams. The story mainly revolves around Paritosh and his encounters with various people afflicted by several diseases, both physical and psychological. Meanwhile, the faith-healer comes across a mourning Rehana Banu who has been in that state for three days. However, on day four she becomes utterly silent. Rehana becomes wordless for the next five days after telling her husband, Hakim, that she got Ratna, her stillborn child, back. Here, the story takes a remarkable turn when Rehana Begum states that she has started dreaming of devouring Ratna up. The story becomes more unearthly and twisted when Paritosh begins to cure her. It is in that very moment when Paritosh looks into Rehana’s cold bluish eyes, he understands that she has been possessed by several demons. Later, when Rehana comes round, Paritosh grows weary and frightened of her. He runs away from the city and goes back to his village. At the end of the story, Paritosh is described in a paranoid state, fearing for his life.

While “The Ground Beneath Paritosh’s Feet” is teeming with nightmarish dread, “The Merman’s Prayer” is full of fairy tale elements which reads like a modern retelling of a classic *roopkatha* or folktale. It was first published as “Jolpurusher Prarthona” in the author’s *Prem O Prarthonar Golpo*. The story unfolds with Shekul Arefin who absconded to Cox’s Bazar with his company’s money. However, Shekul had not stolen the money for himself but for his sister, whom he loves dearly. His sister had recently been a victim of sexual assault, and after the misfortune, she becomes a living apparition. Shekul is desperate to bring her smile back at any cost. To ensure his sister’s better future, he arranges a marriage for her, embezzles the company’s money to give it to the newly married couple, and he himself goes into exile. No one knows about Shekul’s whereabouts, yet he is unremittingly anxious about getting caught at any moment, which is not unnatural. However, his anxiety turns into paranoia when he sees his photograph in the newspaper. Until this point, the story unravels in a linear manner. The first hint of magical realism is detected when Shekul encounters a mermaid named Rehana in the sea one evening. Here lies the excellence of Islam’s narrative technique where he merges the real with the supernatural. We have read about mermaids in fairy tales, and we are also aware that this story is not one of them. Yet, we cannot readily dismiss the mermaid’s

presence as Shekul's hallucination. Islam has assembled his readers on the fringes of rationality from where countless gateways of interpretation open.

Demarcating magical realism

Emerging as a German painting style in the 1920s, magical realism soon became a literary genre. As a literary style, magical realism conjoins real and magical elements in an elaborate realistic setting, and blurs the defining line between fantasy and real. However, it should not be confused with fantasy because, unlike fantasy fiction, the basis of magical realism is always embedded in reality. Gabriel García Márquez once said, "My most important problem was destroying the line of demarcation that separates what seems real from what seems fantastic" (cited in Kelby, 2009, p. 115). Strecher (1999) explains that "magical realism is what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something 'too strange to believe'" (p. 267).

Booming in Latin America, the magical realist writing style is heavily influenced by the European literary movement of Surrealism, which aims to delineate the natural, cultural and political landscape of Latin American countries. Pioneer practitioners of this literary genre include Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes. However, magical realism has transcended the boundaries of Latin America and inspired writers from diverse cultures and languages, namely Salman Rushdie, Haruki Murakami and Olga Tokarczuk. Bengali literature is not different either. The Bengali language has a rich tradition of literature comprising oral traditions, folklore, fairy tales, mythologies, legends, ballads, and proverbs, dating back to more than a thousand years. Owing to this grandiose literary heritage of fantasy and fiction, access into the world of magical realism has been relatively easier for Bengali writers. Nabarun Bhattacharya, Akhteruzzaman Elias, Shahidul Zahir, Jibanananda Das and Syed Waliullah are among the most prominent Bengali magical realist writers. More contemporary Bangladeshi writers of this genre include Humayun Ahmed, Nasreen Jahan and Syed Manzoorul Islam. This paper aims to approach Islam's stories from a magical realist perspective with particular reference to the rubrics outlined by Wendy B. Faris (2004), while consciously conceding paranoia as a driving force of the mentioned stories.

Faris (2004) has laid out five basic characteristics of magical realism to understand its nature. According to her, the first component of magical realism is irreducible element. Anything that cannot be explained by the empirical law of the universe is an irreducible element. Second, there will be a compelling account of the existence of a phenomenal world. Third, while reconciling with the antithetical understanding of a phenomenon, the reader may encounter some unsettling qualms. Fourth, different realms are consolidated in a singular narrative. Lastly, fifth, magical realism interrupts the conventional ideas about time, space, and identity continuum. Aside from Faris' characterization of magical realism, several other features, such as – fairy tale and nightmarish elements, the author's reticence and political critique are also palpable in magical realist texts. However, it is the understanding of the authors of this paper that the sensation of magical realism can also be induced by employing paranoia as a feature of the story.

Paranoia acts as an apparatus for provoking the impression of magical realism. To comprehend the fluidity of magical realism and its correlation with paranoia, we can refer to psychotherapist Sonja Bar-Am's choice for magical realism to approach psychosis. Bar-Am (2015) hopes that by taking magical realism as a mode for "listening space and position," (p. 20) a psychotherapist can deal with psychosis. She believes that the meaning of deranged descriptions of psychosis can be found in magical realism because the latter "describes the context and landscape of a story that are otherwise realistic" (p. 20), resembling the account of a psychotic event. Green et al. (2008) emphasize that a central symptom of psychosis is paranoia. Rycroft (1968) classifies paranoia as a functional psychosis characterized by delusions of grandeur and persecution but without intellectual deterioration, as we can observe in Rehana's nature, by the end of the story, no visible erosion in her behaviour can be noticed. In classic cases of paranoia, the delusions are organized into a coherent, internally consistent delusional system on which the patient is prepared to act (Rycroft, 1968). Paranoia is usually preceded by anxiety and fear, and often results in delusion and irrationality. For example, though Paritosh's fear of getting gulped by Rehana starts from an anxiety, it ends up in severe delusion where Paritosh believes that Rehana is also going to ingest him like the children. Colby (1981) claims that in the centre of paranoia, there are grinding delusions and false beliefs whose propositional content forms around the ideas of being threatened, harmed, accused, and so on by either hostile specific individuals or groups. These grinding delusions and false beliefs can be witnessed in Shekul's case where the mermaid may only be his hallucination which helps him to cope with the constant threat of being caught by the police. This paper explores paranoiac events like these veiled underneath the curtain of magical realism in "The Ground Beneath Paritosh's Feet" and "The Merman's Prayer."

Magical realism and paranoia in the two short stories

Before delving into the textual analyses of these stories, it would be worth mentioning some common features of magical realism and paranoia that are already existent in them. In both of the stories, Islam uses complicated narratives and plots to conflate the real or ordinary with the surreal or extraordinary. For instance, both stories exhaust fairy tale features as Paritosh miraculously brings a child named Maria out of a deep coma within a day. Similarly, Shekul's encounter with a mermaid and his eventual transfiguration as a merman repeatedly reminds the readers about the Bengali fairy tales from *Thakurmar Jhuli* where the figures like *jolkonna* or mermaid and *kobiraj* or faith-healers are quite popular characters. Conversely, Islam also uses elements of surprise or abrupt shocks, dreams and nightmares with a strong presence of a phenomenal world which causes unsettling doubts among the readers. The uncertainty of the narratives like whether Rehana is actually consuming those babies or those are simply her dreams, whether Paritosh actually sees the demons in Rehana's eyes or his own eyes are playing tricks on him, whether Shekul actually falls in love with a mermaid or the mermaid is just a projection of his escapist mind – uncertainties like these lead the readers to question the sanity of the characters and the reliability of the writer. Nonetheless, Islam's intrinsic ability of unconventional storytelling captivates the readers, and they willingly suspend their disbeliefs. This unique ability has allowed him to merge the two realms, two worlds and juxtapose magical realism with paranoia.

Externally, “The Ground Beneath Paritosh’s Feet” is concerned with paranormal and ghostly elements. Islam creates a congruous unification of paranoia and magical realism in this story. The author exploits magical realism to juxtapose the paranormal alongside the ordinary and everyday life. The abnormal dreams of Rehana feasting on children are portrayed in such a realistic way that the boundaries between the real and the unreal are blurred. His choice of diction in the story, such as “murderous gaze,” (p.159) “dismembered body parts,” (p. 159) “the wings of a screeching owl,” (p. 159) reflect the supernatural elements that easily blend with the everyday reality of the world. Another aspect of magical realism is that it creates contradiction and unsettling doubt in understanding events. The narrator defines the story as a mystery like “the mystery of the non-birth of Rehana’s child” (p. 147). This tale is about “an unknown realm” where dreams turn into nightmares and “birth equal death” (p. 147). The narrator in the story is a university professor who is writing a book on “Habermas and the unfinished project of Enlightenment” (p. 154), someone who does not believe in the supernatural powers of faith-healers. For the educated people like the narrator and his wife, faith-healing is more like malarkey. To their surprise, Paritosh magically heals the narrator of the story from his excruciating pain of frozen shoulder within a week. Nevertheless, when Paritosh’s therapy on the narrator begins to improve his condition, he and his wife are also taken by disbelief. Through Paritosh’s faith-healing abilities, Islam blurs the distinction between belief and disbelief to make the readers believe that everything is possible and believable.

In order to immerse the readers in his make-believe narrative, Islam uses extraordinary imagery, symbolism, and paradox in his writing to create the effects of defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is a literary device by which language is used so that ordinary and familiar things or objects are demonstrated to look different (Nayar, 2010, p. 8). In this process of transformation, the contents of reality are presented through language so that they appear to be illusory. For example, it is common for mothers to dream about their lost child, but Rehana dreams of feasting on her stillborn child. Later, her dreams become more troublesome when she starts counting all the infants, she has relished. In this process of defamiliarization, the usual dream of an unborn child transforms into a nightmarish reality. The use of dreams in such a manner is an example of the closeness or merging of the ordinary and magical realms. Basu (2014) states that Islam presents the paranormal so skillfully alongside the normal in a realistic setting that the readers are willing to suspend their disbelief and move along with the narrative. Although the readers cannot rationalize Rehana’s dreams, they willingly suspend their disbelief and accept that such paranormal episodes can indeed occur.

Because of his crafty execution of narratives, Islam’s writing style has often been veritably compared to Márquez’s. Like Márquez, he also weaves an emanation of perplexity by lingering between the worlds of dreams, nightmares and reality. “The Ground Beneath Paritosh’s Feet” particularly resonates with “I Sell My Dreams” by Márquez (1994). In the latter, the protagonist Frau Frieda, who wears an emerald snake ring on her index finger, earns her living by selling her dreams to wealthy families. So powerful are her prophetic visions that whoever receives them begins to plan their daily activities as Frieda dictates. She once saves the narrator’s life from a danger with the help of her dreams. In this way, Paritosh is like Frieda since he also uses his healing power to

treat other people's ailments. Though Frieda can foresee the miseries and deaths of others, however, she could not foreknow her own death.

Similarly, while healing everyone's demonic possessions, Paritosh could not prevent himself from the clasp of demons. At the end of the story, Paritosh begins to fear for his life and gradually descends into paranoia. In both the stories, dreams and nightmares become a part of reality. Furthermore, Rehana's unsettling dreams and their accounts invoke the nightmarish and haunting qualities of the story. Such magical realistic features remind the readers of another short story by Márquez, "I Only Came to Use the Phone," where the protagonist María goes through indescribable misfortunes and is erroneously taken to a mental asylum (Mahmud, Nasrin & Hasan, 2015). Here, imprisoned María encounters gruesome experiences in the sanatorium that transcends her incarceration. Likewise, "The Ground Beneath Paritosh's Feet" plunges the readers into the labyrinth of magical realism and convinces them into believing the unearthly realities of the stories which, in isolation, would seem incredulous.

Paranoia plays a vital role in "The Ground Beneath Paritosh's Feet" since both Rehana and Paritosh suffer from paranoiac episodes at some point of the story, and these paranoiac events can be explored by employing psychoanalytical criticism. Psychoanalysis is a means of investigating the unconscious dimension of human mind initiated by Sigmund Freud (Buchanan, 2010). Rehana's slow leaning towards madness is a key device that embodies the fragmentary nature of human mind. Islam proficiently intertwines the paranoiac elements in this story. At first, Rehana's dreams of eating children are chaotic, but gradually, as Rycroft (1968) suggests in his book on psychoanalysis, they become coherent and organized. In fact, she starts to count and identify the children with her fingers that she claims to have consumed as if there is nothing unearthly about it. It indicates that Rehana has interchanged her *psychic reality* with perceptible reality. In *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (2010), Carl Jung defines psychic reality to be an intermediary phase between the physical world of sense and the spiritual world of thought and cognition. In other words, psychic reality feels real to the person it happens and they have no idea that it might not be real (Buchanan, 2010). Therefore, Rehana's dreams interfere with her worldly emotions and reality, and replaces them with psychic reality. However, her change is not noticed by anyone except Paritosh, who does not fail to identify the coldness in her eyes and predatory nature in her composure.

More pertinently, Rehana's dreams can easily be elucidated through the Freudian theory of dream and wish-fulfilment. Freud links dream works to psychoanalytical criticism because he considers dreams as a language, the language of the unconscious and of repressed desires. They are a state of tension between the impulse or instinctual desire and the power of repressing force (cited in Nayar, 2010). While reflecting upon Rehana's dreams, the narrator's wife, a reproductive health specialist, regards them as effects of pre- and post-partum complications. She also refers to the instances of mothers eating their children in dreams that can be traced back to "Cree and Cherokee Indians, and down south among the Inca women" (p. 154). So, Rehana's dreams, although unusual, are not unheard of, and certainly not without precedence. She also alludes to Freud and continues that it is not rare for mothers to imagine terrible things happening to their children.

Furthermore, the narrator reveals in the story that Rehana's ghastly dreams have deeper roots since her pregnancy was unintended.

Here, we can refer to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1999) in which he analyzes a lady's dream where she sees her 15-year-old daughter lying dead in a box. Fascinatingly, the detail of the box helps to explain the meaning of the dream and its relations to Freud's theory of wish-fulfilment. The connection is in the language and translation of the word 'box'. In German, a related word for box is 'Büchse', which means "tin can" in English (p. 121). However, 'Büchse' also denotes a vulgar meaning for female genitals. Further, Freud infers that the child in the box signifies a child in the womb. During the process of the analysis, the lady admits that, like many young women, she was not happy either when she found herself pregnant and wished that the child might die in her womb. Once in an outburst of anger with her husband, she even beat her stomach with her fists to strike the child within it. Thus, Freud (1999) concludes that the dead child in the dream was a projection of wish-fulfilment that the lady had abandoned fifteen years ago.

Similarly, Rehana was not happy either when she found out that she was pregnant. She did not expect to go through the phase of motherhood all over again, and she was mainly afraid of losing her life while giving birth. In the story, Rehana says, "I won't survive this ordeal" (p. 156), which implies that she unconsciously wished for the child's extermination. Unlike the lady in Freud's case, however, Rehana's wish becomes fulfilled, and the child dies while she survives. Nevertheless, as soon as her wish is fulfilled, it transcends her unconscious and enters the conscious by emerging as dreams. In this manner, Rehana's repressed desires are articulated through her dreams, and she condemns herself for infanticide. Her self-reproach is so severe that Rehana dreams of devouring her dead daughter in a desperate attempt to get her back. Eventually, Rehana is consumed by the overwhelming guilt and, from a caring mother, she becomes a cannibalistic monster like the witch from the German fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel," who only feasts on the fattened children.

While Rehana is consuming children in her dreams, Shekul is being consumed by his own anxiety and day-dreaming about a mermaid, which can be interpreted as his wish-fulfilling mind providing him solace through escape from all his turmoil. According to *Lexico Dictionaries*, 'escapism' is the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy. Freud (1976), while looking more closely into the origin and significance of fantasies and its link to escapism, notes that fantasies are mental activities which were once real occurrences in the primaeval times, such as "the seduction of children, the inflaming of sexual excitement by observing parental intercourse, the threat of castration (or rather castration itself)" (p. 418). Freud (1976) maintains that although these fantasies can be a great source to vitalize the pleasure principle, the human ego is slowly educated by the pressure of external necessity to appreciate reality and obey the reality principle. As the ego gradually accepts the reality principle, it renounces some pleasure principles. However, there remains a mental activity where these abandoned sources of pleasures are allowed a further existence, a subdued form where they are out of the proximity of reality. As Freud (1976) concludes, these "imaginary wish-fulfilments brings satisfaction

with it, although it does not interfere with a knowledge that what is concerned is not real” (p. 419). Shekul is trying not only physically but also mentally to escape from reality. He has been hiding for almost a month but only comes across the mermaid after the news of his searching is published in the newspapers. This is too convenient to be a mere coincidence. Indeed, the mermaid works as a means of wish-fulfilment for Shekul to escape from his grim reality and paranoid mind.

Among all the prospective fantastical elements, choosing the mermaid as the vessel for escapism might initially appear strange. However, after considering Islam’s inclination for *roopkatha* and folktale, where the mermaid is a familiar character, it is more understandable that he would reiterate the antiquated love story between a man and a mermaid from a modern angle. The mermaid is the projection of the author’s imaginative mind, who is helping Shekul through his crisis. All the external factors – Shekul being a fugitive, the newspaper announcement, and the pressing fear of police showing up on his doorsteps anytime — have played pivotal roles in his mental escapism. However, when he discovers that the police have reached the hotel and inquired after him to the hotel owner in his absence, he understands that he cannot escape from the law for much longer. The last episode takes place on the shore where the mermaid offers to transform him into a merman so that he can leave behind his past and join her in the Neptunian life. Contemplating that he has no better choice, Shekul agrees to her proposal and prays for becoming a merman. The ending of the story can indeed be explicated as the ultimate escape – *suicide*. According to Baumeister (1990), suicide is the end of “the highly aversive, problematic awareness of one’s painful life situation” (p. 107). He suggests that people do not essentially want to kill themselves but their excruciatingly painful thoughts and feelings. Thus, suicide emerges as a fatal escalation of a person’s effort to escape. “Suicide can be seen as an ultimate step in the effort to escape from self and world” (p. 90), Baumeister infers. When Shekul becomes confident that his day of reckoning is fast approaching, he chooses death over imprisonment. The imagery of the mermaid is merely to mollify his suicide’s intensity.

Shekul’s immense passion to break free from his prison of anguish and greet the inevitable with open arms remind us of Franz Kafka’s protagonists, namely Gregor Samsa from *The Metamorphosis* (1996) and Joseph K. from *The Trial* (1968). Kafka’s writings reveal the anxiety, suffering, turmoil, the frustrated hope and longing that constitute the human condition (Steinhauer, 1983). The nightmarish world that Kafka represents is preoccupied with paranoia, corruption, cruelty, absurdity, irrationality, injustice, and dejection. Kafka’s characters are often overwhelmed by the bureaucracies and find themselves in surrealistic and magical realistic situations that induce the sensation of senselessness, helplessness, and paranoia. It is a labyrinth where cause and effect are inverted, actions and reactions do not correspond, and all sorts of logical reasoning are ceased.

Now if we look at the beginning of the short story “The Merman’s Prayer” by Islam and the first sentences of *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* by Kafka, we can instantly see the resemblance. “When Shekul Arefin got up from an uneasy sleep at nine in the morning in room number 206 of Hotel Urmila at Cox’s Bazar, “The Merman’s Prayer” begins, “he had no idea that his photograph had appeared in at least two

newspapers of Dhaka that morning” (Islam, 2013, p. 276). Now the introductory sentence of *The Metamorphosis* reads, “When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin” (Kafka, 1996, p. 3). Structurally these two opening sentences are almost identical. Finally, *The Trial* opens, “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning” (Kafka, 1968, p. 7). Not only do all these stories begin in a similar pattern, they also offer a self-conscious ironic situation that instantly engages its readers. Each of the stories starts with a new day, which represents hope, and a new crisis. Two of the crises are real; the other is surreal.

Whether real or surreal, the crushing pressure of bureaucracy is an integral part of both Islam’s and Kafka’s stories. After turning into vermin, Samsa’s first worry is how he will get to work. Because if he does not go to work, he will not be able to pay the debt he owes to his employer. Even under such a catastrophe, he could not think of a greater affliction. On the contrary, Joseph K. is being accused of an unknown crime. The law keeps confusing him and contradicting itself, which finally claims his life. K. died without knowing his own offence; such is the fatality of the system in Kafka’s world. Similar to Kafka’s heroes, Shekul is also stuck inside the crux of authority and law from which there is no way of decamping. Being well aware that if he usurps money from the company, he can never get out of this maze, yet he does this for the sake of his sister’s happiness. Shekul’s affection for his sister resembles Samsa’s feeling for his sister. Towards the end of *The Metamorphosis*, Samsa could not tolerate anyone except his sister, but he could also sense how he has become a burden on everyone, especially his sister. Through his death, Samsa has freed his sister from that burden and through sacrificing his own innocence and freedom, Shekul has freed his sister from the shackles of her traumatic past.

Even in these grave situations, Islam has not failed to entertain his readers. The “self-conscious irony” and “comedic playfulness” (p. 143), inherent qualities of Kafka’s writings, as Adams (2002) has pointed out, are also evident in Islam’s narrative in “The Merman’s Prayer.” For instance, at the beginning of the story, Shekul could not understand why his employer had given the additional 25,000 takas with the round figure of 700,000 takas for transferring to Chittagong. Nevertheless, when he sees in the newspaper that the bounty on his head is exactly 25,000 takas, he figures perhaps that was the reason for the additional money. Or, the time when Islam sarcastically draws our attention to how love can be defeated by an emigration visa in today’s world when Shekul’s former lover Farzana chooses to marry an engineer over him because the engineer can take her to Canada. This effortless irony is a prominent feature of Islam’s writings, which works as a comic relief for his readers.

After considering the unpredictability of human life, Nasir (2012) termed this world as “Kafkaesque World” (p. 40). Nevertheless, the question, ‘When does the world stop being Kafkaesque?’ is equally pertinent. Nasir (2012) hopes for a post-Kafkaesque world while pondering the present crises happening around us. He interrogates, “Can we hope that the post-crisis world will be a post-Kafkaesque world? Is this hope itself Kafkaesque?” (p. 53). These profound questions are yet to be answered. However, Shekul

attains the post-Kafkaesque hope through his metamorphosis as a merman at the end, an opportunity neither Samsa, nor Joseph K. is granted.

Conclusion

To sum up, this paper explores how paranoia has been used as a catalyst for eliciting the sensation of magical realism in “The Ground Beneath Paritosh’s Feet” and “The Merman’s Prayers.” Islam’s short stories unify the realistic descriptions of the ordinary lives of Bangladeshi people with extraordinary or fantastic elements. This coalescence transpires in such a way that the surrealist imagination becomes a part of reality. Mainly preoccupied with dreams and nightmares, “The Ground Beneath Paritosh’s Feet” exhibits the paranoiac traits in the human psyche and induces the feeling of magical realism through its powerful, imaginative, and vivid phraseology. Composed on a more optimistic note, “The Merman’s Prayer” celebrates the unification of two unlikely lovers in a Kafkaesque world, where living happily ever after has become as rare as mermaids. In short, Islam persuasively creates a magical terrain for the readers through the aforementioned stories by effectively employing paranoiac elements in them.

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