Magic and Realism in *The Tailor’s Needle*

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Abstract

*Lakshmi Raj Sharma’s The Tailor’s Needle* is a novel that seems to employ more magical realism than, perhaps, any other contemporary novel. It depends upon magical realism for its plot, situations and its very feel.

*The Tailor’s Needle* uses magical realism because of this inherited anxiety. The author tells the story by combing the ‘improbable’ with the ‘mundane’ to attract the Western reader. The hero, Sir Saraswati, manages impossible things like taming the British Viceroy, cowing a dreaded dacoit, solving a murder mystery in the haunted Nadir Palace, etc. His experience with a mystic who can virtually coexist in the worlds of the living and the dead is also fascinating. A fakir can curse Maneka, the heroine, and change her life as well as the direction in which the novel could have progressed.

Bhabha suggests that the colonizer suffers anxiety of mimicry (from the colonized) and therefore steers into the domain of the uncanny. Hence writers of the colonizing race frequently traverse the path of fantasy and the supernatural instead of projecting worlds of social reality. This paper suggests that the colonized author also suffers the same anxiety that the colonizing author suffers as the process of hybridization makes him inherit this anxiety as well. It seeks to delve deeper on this line.

**Keywords:** Magic, Realism. Postcolonial, India, Bhabha.
Is India still part of the Third World, and are Indian novelists qualitatively still novelists of the Third World? The Third World novelist in English, of which the Indian novelist is virtually the leader, is swimming in a sea of anxieties. For the Indian, as for every Third World novelist, the first problem relates to writing in the master’s language, which might well parallel, in a sense, waiting upon his master’s voice. It is a problem similar to what Homi K. Bhabha has visualized in being at home abroad, and feeling as though abroad at home. The second anxiety relates to the reader(s): Would the majority of the readers be Indian, Asian, European, or American? Which audience is he to target? In trying to serve several kinds of readers he can end up impressing none. But there is a third anxiety which most South Asian novelists face, and this anxiety seems to be of a highly postcolonial nature, the anxiety of inheriting the master’s anxiety. This anxiety springs from what Bhabha has conceived as ‘mimicry’, namely that instead of being imitated as a member of a superior race the colonizer could end up being mimicked disrespectfully by the colonized subject, and this anxiety is present in his literary texts. The Indian writer is hardly free from the anxiety of his erstwhile master. Like the other things that he imitates, he learns the experience of his erstwhile master’s anxiety inheriting it along with everything else that contributes to his hybridization. Yet there is a constant effort to overcome these anxieties and one such effort, as Bhabha points out, is to leave the path of realism and travel along the route of fantasy, getting into the realm of the uncanny. Thus the construction of romantically unfamiliar and unreal, supernatural worlds, remote in time or space or both, and the use of devices such as magical realism in fiction seem an obvious outcome of postcolonial experience. This experience generates anxieties for the ruling as well as the ruled races; for the former, due to fear of mimicry and for the latter merely in the ongoing process of hybridization. The result – both can resort to the creation of romantic worlds that avoid realism. Romanticism, and fantasy, is often an escape route taken to conceal anxiety. Just as the colonising Prospero found the enchanted magical island suitable for his unhappy circumstance in The Tempest, similarly the colonizing Brit found it suitable to enter the world of gothic fiction or the one of nineteenth century romanticism. The colonized South Asian author, on the other hand, frequently delved into some version of magical realism or other in order to find ways out of his own ensnarement. He often took recourse to, and refuge in, being the Oriental tourist guide for the Occidental traveller (reader), making arrangements for a comfortable stay for him in his fictional world, here, while on his carnivalesque holiday. L R Sharma notes that, ‘The occidental world is less exciting in a sense than the oriental, for the reader in the West, and therefore the Indian writer, writing in English, tries to fulfil the need for the desired excitement with.’ (Charles Dickens and Me, p. 301)

Lakshmi Raj Sharma’s The Tailor’s Needle (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2012) happens to be one such novel. It uses magical realism with a vengeance in order to avoid a narrative of stark realism. Instead of writing in the ironic mode, the satirical form, or using a genre which relies solely on the projection of social reality, this author chooses to take the reader into the past, when it was still possible to possess romantic chivalry and heroic daring, when aristocratic living could land one into bleak, frightening forts and palaces of maharajas, and when the romance in the luxurious existence of viceroy was still available. The Tailor’s Needle is set in pre-independence India, ending just before 1947 and beginning as early as 1917.
Travelling into the past can be a highly romantic experience and the reader can happily leave his world of reality to take on the experience of one that is far from real for him. The ‘worlding’ of this novel is made of some very interesting, though now rather unreal scenes. We are first introduced to a man, Sir Saraswati Chandra Ranbakshi, who is always doing improbable things; who is ready to take on a viceroy of British India and cow him down with his wit, his daring, his political sagacity, and above all his education which has made him into a tailor’s needle, a man who is sharp enough to penetrate and stitch together almost every kind of difficult and disrupting situation that he encounters. The tailor’s needle is a metaphor that describes a man for all seasons. Sir Saraswati does not only take on and humble the British Viceroy of India, His Excellency the Lord Mortimer Edmund Griffin-Tiffin, he also similarly tames the dreaded dacoit, Jhanda Daku, who has threatened to rob Seth Tona Mall and warned him of the direst consequences if he did not surrender all his wealth. In addition, Sir Saraswati is able to act as the detective of a murder mystery that takes the reader to the haunted Nadir Palace where his equally daring daughter, Maneka, has married the psychological pervert, the masochistic Mohan Kaushik, and been led to a situation where she has probably murdered him. Furthermore, Sir Saraswati has had some mystic experiences as well, as when he has visited a sanyasi’s hermitage and has had one of the most interesting though difficult to believe encounters with someone who seems to co-exist in this as well as the other world. Then, Sir Saraswati’s handling of the British Collector of Mirzapur, Larry Stephens, is also an exercise in magical realism. The local beneficiary of the British Viceroy’s power, the Collector, melts before Sir Saraswati like a cube of ice put atop a flame. The interesting thing is that all these amazingly incredible episodes connected with Sir Saraswati’s character are tied together with a plot that is highly realistic and probable. Sir Saraswati could well be described as the coalescence of the ‘improbable’ with the ‘mundane’ the two terms used by Salman Rushdie to analyse magical realism.

I believe that there are few novels that use magical realism to the extent that The Tailor’s Needle does and I say this with conviction. Interestingly, when I interviewed the novelist and was told by him initially that he did not plan the novel with any premeditated narrative devices like magical realism. But as the interview progressed he agreed that the novel did contain magical realism of some kind. But Sharma, for some reason did not want to be projected as an author employing magical realism. He feared that if he was labelled as one employing that device he might well be considered a second rate Rushdie. He probably felt that when several people began to use magical realism, it would be reduced to a weakened kind of magical realism. Surprisingly enough one year after the interview he confessed in his article to have strategically used this device, for he was afraid his novel might slip into oblivion if he does not use something extra-ordinary in his novel. Sharma admitted:

My story could have easily lost its lustre in the telling. I instantly decided to turn to some master of fiction to see how they managed such long tales. Instinctively, my mind turned to Dickens and before long I was turning the pages of his lengthy novels. After seeing some, I found how frequently Dickens returned to mystery in the second half of his novels. (Charles Dickens and Me, p. 296)
I would also like to suggest that magical realism is in no way an inferior mode of narration. Neither is its use evidence of the author’s short cut to fame or to the goal of hooking the reader by cheating him with improbable lies. On the contrary, magical realism is an indication of the supreme confidence of the novelist in his narrative powers, in himself that he would not leave the reader in the lurch of disappointment and doubt; in a state of non-conviction. Why is *The Tailor’s Needle* the novel which uses magical realism to its maximum advantage? This is so simply because magical realism lies at the base, at the heart, at every turning point in the plot. The episodes that make up the story of this novel revolve round magical realism and are impelled by it. In order to substantiate my contention, I turn to the plot of the novel.

The novel begins on a political as well as personal note, quite realistically, with Sir Saraswati and his son, Yogendra, both unhappy in their own situations. Sir Saraswati has returned to India a barrister from Cambridge in 1901 and having served for years (and now left) the Maharaja of Kashinagar has finally settled down to a domesticity that little suits him. He is unhappy that he has not joined the Civil Disobedience Movement actively. He is at the same time plagued by the problems that his two daughters and one son face. Yogendra, on the other hand, is tormented by the fact that at a time when India is burning in the flames of the Indian freedom struggle he has gone and fallen in love. Till this point and in the next chapters which introduce us to the Viceroy and to the Maharaja of Kashinagar everything is realistically portrayed. The description of the Viceroy’s oddities is followed by the politics of the state of Kashinagar and to the fear of annexation due to the growing tentacles of the British Doctrine of Lapse. No reader would anticipate the arrival of magical realism in a narrative that opens on a note of freedom-politics on the one hand and a budding love affair on the other. Yet even as we see the Ranbakshis travel southwards to Mirzapur from the mountainous Kashinagar we are given some highly unbelievable views with a brick face, straightforward, narration. Sir Saraswati tells his two children who are pained at leaving Kashinagar for good that it is possible to carry Kashinagar with them:

> You have small minds yet, so you can laugh at what I say. A day may come, if you grow sensible, i.e., when you will see that even in a desert of the plains, it is possible to see these green mountains of Kashinagar. (p. 27)

In Mirzapur all the improbable things begin to happen though they are narrated with no consciousness on the author’s part of sounding far fetched. While reading *The Tailor’s Needle* I was increasingly reminded of Gabriel García Márquez’s statement that when he wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude* he thought of the way in which his grandmother narrated tales:

> The tone that I eventually used in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was based on the way my grandmother used to tell stories. She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told it with complete naturalness. . . . What was most important was the expression she had on her face. She did not change her expression at all when telling her stories and everyone was surprised.

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In my interview with the author he told me that while writing *The Tailor’s Needle* he was conscious of the stories he had heard from his father about his grandfather’s times and how his father would insist that humorous narrations should be made with a straight face. His father had said that those who laughed at their own jokes were the most stupid narrators and he, therefore, narrated all his comic incidents rather seriously. This advice had had some effect on the author-son because he is capable of cracking a number of jokes with a serious face. More than that Sharma was more influenced by Charles Dickens as he acknowledged in his article:

> Another factor that makes Dickens so differently fascinating is that in his narrations is contained the bizarre, and the uncanny romanticizing of the ordinary (though very basic) emotions, situations, and relationships. His method is somewhat like the method of magical realism that ties together the strange and the mundane without too much fuss. (Charles Dickens and Me, p. 300)

So while these highly improbable things happen in the novel they are made to look like routine events with nothing that is apparently incredible or worth taking with a pinch of salt. The best example of this kind of situation is the chapter in which Sir Saraswati takes his ten year old son, Yogendra, to the *ashram* of the *sanyasi* called Swami Jeevananda in a small sparsely inhabited village named Kamroha (pp. 42-56). Sir Sarswati and Yogendra were utterly surprised to know that the Swami had anticipated their arrival and that’s why he had sent all other people, who were living with him, out to have some privacy with Sir Saraswati. The Swami who is in good health comes up with startling things about his death, or rather his time of rebirth, which would be in a few minutes, and he does die at the moment he has predicted as a stunned Sir Saraswati and Yogendra look on:

> ‘Why did you expect us Swamiji? We did not inform you that we were coming.’
> ‘You had to come because it was time for me to go,’ said the Swami. ‘It is time for me to take another birth; you had to come! How would you not come?’
> The father and son looked first at the sanyasi and then at each other. There was a sense of finality in his words. ‘Come in, come in,’ he said as the two followed him into the hut, almost mesmerized.
> ‘Do you live here by yourself?’ asked Saraswati. ‘I have others living with me here, but I have sent them away for a few hours. Today I had to meet you alone. I had to tell you some important things before I left.’
> ‘What did you wish to tell me?’ asked Saraswati.
> ‘You are a chosen son. You are very close to the Creator and I want to bless you and your son. (p. 44)

This episode is more significant to *The Tailor’s Needle* than it apparently seems to be. It is not only one of the episodes which are central to the texture of the novel. It also contains certain prophecies about Sir Saraswati in this early stage of the novel which set the future of the Ranbakshi family in perspective. It tells us that in the scheme of Divinity there are some chosen ones who would carry out the plans of Providence. Sir Saraswati is one such chosen figure. Due to this prophecy, the novel takes on an epical tone. In epics the gods come down to take part in
the lives of people or they reveal what they have planned – which people will suffer and which will not. By showing the divine course of action through a narrative that seems to belong to the mundane world the novel strangely demonstrates that the epical times are never over and have the potential to return even when we believe in post-modernity and what it represents so blatantly in our minds. This is the strength of magical realism; it can say things that would never be possible for the author who shuns this device. If Sir Saraswati, who is very human at times, can achieve virtually impossible things and still not seem unconvincing as a character that becomes possible only because of the way (through the magical realism approach) the novelist drives home the improbable into the consciousness of the reader. It could be said that due to the use of magical realism an author of today can become a contemporary of Homer, Valmiki, Ved Vyasa, Virgil, or Milton.

This kind of activity is not limited to the spiritual plane. Just as this chapter ends we go into the next where the dreaded dacoit, Jhanda, has threatened to rob the poor rich Seth Tona Mall. Sir Saraswati is now to do the virtually impossible. Capture, ward off, or kill the dacoit and first of all save the Seth from him. The way he manages the show seems to be out of a movie, the narrative makes the impossible seem possible. The dacoit is defeated, caught and handed over to the police. The author tells me that though the episode might seem unreal at a level, it is in fact an actual happening as told to him by his father. This episode helps the reader to see the unusual kind of people who lived in those times in the Indian subcontinent. The scene contains a lot of romance. It seems to show off India’s past heroism to the contemporary, rather domesticated, citizen, particularly of the Western world. The author could manage this scene so well in the narrative which looks more dramatic because the author is a dramatist himself and has written many college plays that have earned him quite a reputation in his hometown Allahabad. Mixing narrative with dramatic hues without either losing sheen he imbibed from Dickens as he claims in his article ‘Charles Dickens and Me’.

A turning point in the plot, where Maneka is planning to settle down happily in domesticity, sitting and dreaming in her garden, there comes a fakir with whom she is rude. He curses her and then everything goes wrong with her as it might happen in a fairy tale. The curse actually determines the second half of the novel’s plot, reminding the reader of the curse (the magic in the web) in the handkerchief that Desdemona has lost. It seems that if the fakir had not come her way to curse her, she might have had an entirely different story.

The next scene of this kind shows the improbable happening at the social level. There is a club night in Mirzapur in the Imperial Club where the Brits and other Europeans meet in the evenings to have their recreation. This chapter actually brings magic and realism together. A British magician, Mr. Willy Bouncer, who has come to the club as a guest of one of the members, is introduced to everyone in the club. While he is going to start his magic show, a French lady challenges him saying that there is no such thing as magic in reality. He then asks her to cluck like a hen and when she has made the clucking sound and gets up from her chair soon after, there is a fresh egg on her chair. Magic seems to have a victory over reality. Sir Saraswati’s elder daughter, Maneka, and his son, Yogendra, are in the club. His is the only Indian family allowed there. Both brother and sister are excited as this is one of the first opportunities they have had to mix socially with and enjoy the company of their colonial masters. Yogendra is charmed by magic while his sister decides to taste the reality of life. This is
the evening when she decides to go out into the darkness where she is kissed for the first time by a man, Larry Stephens, the District Collector. While the magic show proceeds inside the club the real story of the novel is taking shape outside. Along with the magical shows in the novel, the author tends to parallel the reality show that goes on simultaneously most of the time. Maneka takes off on her very tragic though bold journey from this Club Night scene, trying to carve out a life independent of her family but seems to make all the mistakes that the world of reality allows her to make, till in the end, Sir Saraswati comes and saves her almost magically, but not before much has been tragically lost for her.

The marriages that take place in this novel seem to be out of a fairy tale. The way Maneka marries Mohan, Shreemal is married to his wife Kaushalya, Sita is married to the Maharaja of Behrampur, Larry Stephens is married to Nimmi, and finally Yogendra is married to Gauri, each can be seen as a fairy tale. And this is a very significant aspect of this novel: it foregrounds marriages in a uniquely different way to the traditional marriages of those times or of any times, for that matter. Then we think of the marriage of Sir Saraswati and Savitri which is a rather ill matched marriage, even though they make it work so well – he is an anglicized man and she is traditionally Indian. But there is love of some kind between this couple. The marriage of Mr. Vaish and Jamuna is even less compatible; there may be very little love between them but the family goes along rather well without it. Shreemal likes to stay away from his wife. From what we hear about Mr. Muddleton from his wife, Joyce Muddleton, they too seem to have come together for the wrong reasons. All the British couples in the club scene are together no doubt but on the point of exchanging life-partners. In the world of The Tailor’s Needle there is an eerie fragility in marriage. The Viceroy has never married as he has a mother-fixation and has the other sexual preference. His mother has married twice but been too demanding on her husbands to allow them much life or perseverance. If the Viceroy’s mother has had two unsuccessful marriages, Mohan Kaushik too has been twice married unsuccessfully. The interesting thing is that all these marriages add to the flavor either of the comedy of manners aspect in this novel or to something much graver than can fit into any kind of comedy.

Nadir Palace, where Maneka and Mohan must survive somehow, seems to be haunted. Here there are two domestics who are like ghosts and they seem closer to Mohan’s heart than his wife, Maneka. The dead wife, Meena, is also there almost alive still and is also closer to Mohan than the living Maneka. Mohan compares Maneka to his dead wife all the time and hopes that she will be like her. There is an old hound who keeps whining. There are several gothic features in this mysterious palace. The atmosphere of Nadir palace is definitely far from the real, normal, world of reality. In the palace the reader is made to sit on the fence between the world of the living and the dead.

When Savitri is dying, she can wait for her husband and her children to return before she dies. Her death will not happen till they are back, as if kept in abeyance by some power that is beyond the rational. Sir Saraswati who is in another province, miles away from his wife feels her pain and rushes towards her even when he has never been told about her critical condition. He can intuit her forthcoming death just as she can hold back her death till he has arrived.

Bhabha has postulated on the uncanny and its relation with migrant experience, particularly related to the colonizer’s retreat into fantasy. He has also spoken of the ambivalence in the hybridization process, about how the colonizer and the colonized pick up each other’s
cultural traits. But what remains to still be noticed after his impressive discourse is the need to read the writings, particularly the fiction, of the colonized subject (who is equally or even more of a split subject) as writing which inherits the anxieties of the apparently superior race. These anxieties send him equally into the domain of fantasy as they do his colonizer and therefore, it is the contention of this paper that magical realism is what should be the highest common factor in the fiction in English of most writing in the Indian subcontinent. Some of these texts would naturally contain more magical realism than others. Some of Rushdie’s for instance contain more than the novel of Arundhati Roy which merely projects the binary opposition between class and caste, making that her sole point of reference for the Western reader (particularly). Projecting the difference between the way Eastern and Western societies operate is naturally attractive for the writer of the subcontinent. Roy’s novel bases much of her focus on the relation between caste and class. The tragic sting in the novel emerges out of this relation. Maggie Anne Bowers places her novel, The God of Small Things, in the magical realism tradition, voicing the childhood trauma ‘when caught in the strictures of the caste system’ and Bowers claims that the novel has a ‘political dimension relating to life in the margins.’ (p. 56)

The Tailor’s Needle also has the caste system publicized as a unique feature of the Hindus in Indian society. What the novel projects for the time in which it is set is true though in a lesser degree even now. The interference of the Indian caste-system in the personal lives of people could be baffling. In this novel the marriage of Yogendra and Gauri becomes a major issue, almost leading to a tragic end until Sir Saraswati’s genius in political diplomacy invents the method of making the inter-caste marriage a possibility. Sir Saraswati, who has been a convincing leader of the Brahmins, is suddenly faced with a situation in which his own son wants to flout the rules of the caste system by marrying a girl lower down in the caste system. Sir Saraswati’s British education naturally helps him to see the pointless in opposing the marriage. But he realizes the consequences of the marriage – a life-long ostracism from his community. He has to then build up a whole political philosophy of who the real Brahmin is and how caste division needs to be reviewed in order to make India a major independent country. It is only because of the happy coincidence that the Indian Freedom Movement is happening at the time that Sir Saraswati is able to convince his community about the wisdom of the marriage. Otherwise he would be deserted by his closest relative, his cousin, the worldly Sir Durga, who is virtually his brother, and with whom he lived in England for more than a decade. Sir Saraswati’s other relatives would also naturally desert him thereafter if Sir Saraswati was not the powerful and convincing man that he was. Thus this novel creates a fascinating case study both for those Indians who are still living in the constriction of the caste system as well as those Westerners who would find it interesting to see how this oddly rigid social stratification works in the Indian situation.

The post-colonial flavor of The Tailor’s Needle is too obvious to need much discussion. Sir Saraswati’s British education is put to test in the Indian situation where he is now expected to oppose British values and culture. He is an admirer of Britain but the times in which he lives require that he change his point of view and perspective and see things as an Indian. He lives up to the need of the hour and that is where the tailor’s needle position of the man stands out. This position is later inherited by Yogendra, making him a tailor’s needle indeed, one who can appreciate virtually everyone from his domineering sister Maneka to the docile sister Sita. He is
able to find something positive even in the villainous Shreemal. Mohan likes him and marries his sister in the belief that if she is his sister she must have some of his virtues. Yogendra can love the Englishman, Bertram, when Indians are getting rough with the colonial masters. He sincerely wishes Bertram well. He accepts British fashions at the time when other Indians are throwing British clothes into the fire. Yogendra is even drawn temporarily towards his English governess’s sister, Lily, who does not get attracted to him probably because she cannot step out of her Englishness. Thus the novel introduces us to a very new concept which is postcolonial to the marrow because it smacks of hybridity, the concept of having the capacity to accept everything without rejecting any; the tailor’s needle position.

I do not say that The Tailor’s Needle makes a deliberate use of postcolonial thought. It seems from the interview that the thought comes naturally to the author without his making a conscious effort. Yet it is difficult to dispute the fact that if the writer is a teacher of literary theory he will naturally be affected by it. However, since the author says that the novel is constructed from the stories he heard in his childhood and his first task in the novel is to tell a story, he must surely have put other considerations like introducing postcolonial thought consciously into the background. Yet to write with a mind free of postcoloniality is virtually inconceivable in this case.

The Tailor’s Needle shows us Edward Said’s orientalism in parts, particularly the early part where the British want to carry their Britain with them wherever they go. They do not mix up with Indian people and have a club in Mirzapur where everything happens in accordance with their culture. The Club Night episode could well have been out of a novel set in England. The education of the Ranbakshi children is entirely British, given to them by British governesses. Maneka learns a great deal about life from her third governess, Mrs. Joyce Muddleton. She takes on the attitude of the lady making it her own and much of her suffering results from that attitude.

The Tailor’s Needle also incorporates feminism, which to an extent is the version which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would have probably liked to construct in a novel. This is what the author said to me in his interview, though he corrected himself soon by pointing out that the Spivak position is accidental rather than deliberate. This statement is very difficult to analyze but the novel creates a remarkable woman in Maneka, the kind that could never be exploited by a male or one who belonged to the white race. Maneka does not hesitate in taking on Larry Stephens in a clash that virtually crushes him in defeat. Having learned her lessons from the Brit she is far from the Indian subaltern who cannot speak. She is more like the woman who cannot hear. She becomes a terror for the British District Collector, Larry Stephens, who has been using her for his sexual gratification, forcing him to marry his house maid, Nimmi, whom he has also used for his pleasure. The dramatic fashion in which she forces him to marry Nimmi seems the typical improbable magical realism episode. Yet the author told me during the interview that he had heard about such a marriage actually being forced upon a British Collector. Thus the wedding is real and unreal at the same time. This segment of the novel, and some others, like where police and railway employees enter the story, make it more anti-imperialistic than postcolonial.

The Tailor’s Needle, however, above all, employs the kind of postcolonial thought that is contained in Homi K. Bhabha’s theory more than it does any other. Stephen Slemon has pointed out three sides to the relationship between magical realism and the postcolonial context, the kind
of context Bhabha visualizes. The first relates to the dual narrative structure of magical realism which presents the points of view of the colonizer and the colonized simultaneously. The second is the problem of representation in magical realism texts; there remain gaps and tensions of representation. The third is perhaps more significant from the point of view of the colonized – the effort to do more justice to what is lost culturally due to the presence of the colonizers. In *The Tailor’s Needle* the three sides pointed by Stephen Slemon are quite visibly there, particularly the second – that of representation – has been mentioned in a review of *The Tailor’s Needle* by the British novelist, Gisela Hoyle. A few lines from this review of the novel reveal the postcolonial features of this novel:

So . . . there is a constant awareness that the narration is in the language of a conqueror, who is both arrogant and smug. Beneath the genteel and graceful world of the Ranbakshi family is the fragility of power within the empire, beneath the ludicrous figure of the viceroy Mortimer Edmund Griffin-Tiffin and his ugly dominating mother is the sinister truth that such people still populate the upper class of England, and beneath the elaborate horror of Nadir Palace lies the truth of abusive relationships and paranoid obsessions. And the apparent naiveté is deeply ironic, through all the experience of the novel runs the concern with justice and freedom: from imperialism, from overbearing parents, from caste rules and from prejudice. (p. 152)

It is this which makes it a work of magical realism. The first of these features is the fear of mimicry. This fear is to be seen in the character of the Viceroy of India, His Excellency Lord Mortimer Edmund Griffin-Tiffin, more than in any other. The Viceroy keeps asking questions which reveal his desire to know what others think about him just as they do his extreme self-consciousness. For instance he asks his barber, Mehmud, whether there is any similarity between his predecessor, Lord Curzon, and himself and his intention is to make a comparative evaluation of himself. Then he makes notes in his diary which reveal that he keeps thinking about the measures he can take to keep his image right. He is also worried that he might get rusted in this country and so plans to read British authors such as Shakespeare, Dickens and Swift (p. 6). When he writes to Sir Saraswati his writing is full of artificiality and rhetoric (p. 13). The Viceroy is annoyed with Mehmud for calling his mother, ‘Lord Mem Sahab’ a phrase that he fears would make her into a man (p. 32). He suggests that he call her ‘Lady Mem Sahab’ instead. He also keeps checking Mehmud for using the English language incorrectly. He probably has the fear, bordering on a phobia, that his mother tongue can be corrupted by Indian users:

‘Mind your language Maymood. You’ve worked at the palace of two English Viceroys and you haven’t been able to learn the simple use of English. What’s ‘twicely’? Will you never try to improve your language?’ (p. 32)

Canister McClout, the Viceroy’s companion and representative at the Kashinagar court, is also very conscious about the way an Indian pronounces English words. He actually gets disturbed by Sir Saraswati’s accent when he realizes that he can speak in a more chaste British accent than the Viceroy himself (p. 10).
Carnivalesque enjoyment and holidaying is what the West desires in the East. Postcolonial theorists have maintained that the Western mind looks upon the East as one does a holiday resort. In comparison to the monotony of routine life in the average Westerner’s experience, the colorful experiences of Egypt, India and other oriental locales can be considered to contain magical or mystical delight. It is for this reason that a number of novels set in the East can claim to provide literary tourism for the Western reader and it is for this that these novels have an added value for him. *The Tailor’s Needle* contains literary tourism for the Western reader in large proportions. The grandeur of India’s past, its maharajas, princes, viceroyls, courts, aristocrats, palaces, weddings, dinners, club life, are all there for the contemporary reader to live with. Supernatural happenings that would engage people are also available in this novel. Thus the novel can be considered to resemble a realistic fairy tale. The presence of the carnivalesque and the fairy tale elements are not forced into the novel’s structure. They seem to grow out of an effort which is primarily involved in telling the tale. The strikingly significant thing is that the multi-generic nature of the novel, with so many parts – the historical, the political, the Raj Novel features, the gothic, the paranormal, the Comedy of Manners related aspects, the postcolonial – all blend naturally with the magical realism and nothing seems to jar.

The historical content of this novel strangely blends with the magical realism. Writing history, as we now know can well parallel an exercise in writing fiction. Wherever there is narrative there will be some fiction. Carolyn Steedman sees the writing of history as nothing very different to magical realism. She writes that it was by reading Jules Michelet that she first understood history-writing in generic terms, as a form of magical realism in which there is the ‘prosaic act of making the dead walk and talk’.

Even though the novel is of a piece with most magical realist novels of countries such as India, Canada, Australia and regions of West Africa and the Caribbean in opposing British colonialism, as Ann Northfield has noted about *The Tailor’s Needle*, it has a unique flavor that singles it out from all other novels in this genre. It is as Gisela Hoyle points out a tailor’s needle among novels as it seems to fit into so many generic categorizations.

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1 Homi K. Bhabha, “Cosmopolitanisms” co-authors Carol A Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Public Culture* (Vol. 12, No. 3, Fall 2000), pp. 577-89.
3 See James McCutcheon, [http://accurapid.com/journal/49garciamarquez.htm](http://accurapid.com/journal/49garciamarquez.htm)
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., “Cross Cultural Variants of Magical Realism”, p. 97.
9 Ibid., “Cross Cultural Variants of Magical Realism”, p. 97.
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Bhabha, Homi K., ‘Cosmopolitanisms’ co-authors Carol A Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Public Culture* (Vol. 12, No. 3, Fall 2000).


