

Blending Magical Realism and Romanticism: A Critical Reading of Select Taranath Tantrik Short Stories by Taradas Bandyopadhyay

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Abstract

The fictional autobiographical stories about Taranath Chakrabarty also known as Taranath Tantrik revolve around his Tantrik scholarship and career. As Tantra itself is magic realist, magical realism takes place in various rustic settings of the stories with a vivid illustration of rural Bengal, nature, Bengali customs, religion, in a colonial context. They carry the author's critical and romantic perception of being a Bengali in a colonized and urbanized Bengal. The use of metanarrative, juxtaposition of urban and rustic settings, criticism of colonialism and capitalism, and establishment of Tantra from margin to center, makes them obscure. Apparently most readers find the stories 'fantastic' and 'gothic', but a critical dissection of them reveal the blended magical realist and romantic elements wrapped around the Tantric rituals of the protagonist. Therefore, this paper critically evaluates the fantastic narrative mode in select Taranath Tantrik short stories where magical realism is blended with romanticism through occultism.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Romanticism, Colonialism, Tantra, Fantasy

Introduction

The character of Taranath is originated in two iconic Bengali occult stories: "Matu, the Crazy Witch" ("মাতু পাগলী"), "The Awakening of Goddess Madhusundari" ("মধুসুন্দরীদেবীর আবির্ভাব") written by one of the most prominent 20th Century Bengali writers Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. After his demise, his son Taradas Bandyopadhyay continues the journey by adding 12 more Taranath short stories and also a novel Circle of Fire (অলাতক্র) having the same protagonist during 1977 to 2000s. Unquestionably the father-son duo has been romantics, and thus nature, rustic life, and spirituality are common themes in their writings. Besides, untimely deaths of loved ones drew theosophical curiosity out of them. Scholars say that the sudden death of Bibhutibhushan's first wife in 1918 turned him to "spirituality and occult for solace" and his "fascination with the occult remained with him throughout his life" (A. Chakraborty, 2020, p. 60). Similarly, Bibhutibhushan's mysterious death created Taradas's lifelong curiosity, faith, and nostalgia for mysticism. He mentioned in an interview that Bibhutibhushan performed a ritual upon the recommendation of a mysterious 'Sadhu' to save Taradas from deathly typhoid, succeed, and was demised after six months as prophesied (Dey, 2020). A Taranath Tantrik story titled "Demon of Fever" ("জ্বরাসুর") is inspired from this

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phenomenon where Taranath's grandfather sacrifices his life to save him from a deadly fever. However, Taradas Bandyopadhyay's narratives of Taranath's occult practices are less 'scary' but more 'romantic' and conclusive than his father's. His romantic pursuits prism his magic realist agenda in these texts.

Magical realism can be connected with romanticism as both schools share common elements including incorporating rustic life, criticizing exploitative social systems, advocating for the margin, disrupting social hierarchy, incorporating the supernatural, promoting mysticism, and existing in folklore. Nevertheless, neither the cohabitation of magical realism and romanticism in literary texts has yet been theorized, nor any writings of Taradas Bandyopadhyay has been given exposure by the critics. Consequently, this paper illustrates the fantastic connection between magic realism and romanticism by presenting a critical evaluation of Taradas Bandyopadhyay's narratives "Taranath Tantrik and Brahma Pishach" ("তারানাথ তন্ত্রিক ও ব্রহ্মপিশাচ") and "Panchamundi Asana" ("পঞ্চমুন্ডির আসন").

This paper reveals Bandyopadhyay's intention of injecting belief in Tantra into the readers and make them conscious about their identity as Bangalis via a juxtaposition of magic realism and romanticism in the metanarratives of Taranath Tantrik stories. Firstly, the paper defines and discusses the backgrounds, features, and scopes of fantasy, magical realism, and romanticism. Secondly, the connection between the narrative modes is explored. Thirdly, the paper foregrounds the emergence of Tantra in Bengali literature through folklore and fantastic texts by romantic writers. Finally, the paper traces out magic-romantic elements encapsulating Tantric phenomena in the selected stories of Taranath Tantrik.

2. Fantastic Correlation of Tantra, Magical Realism, and Romanticism

The fantastic mode emerged in the nineteenth century literary world to "introduce alternatives to the contemporary bourgeois ideology" upheld through the so-called 'realistic' novels. (Jackson, 2009, p. 20). The origin of fantasy can be located back to ancient myths, "legends", and "folklore" (Jackson, 2009, p. 59). Etymologically, 'fantastic' coterminous with 'fantasy' literature derives from the Latin 'phantasticus' meaning "to make visible or manifest" (Jackson, 2009, p. 8). Hence, "all imaginary activity is fantastic" and "all literary works are fantasies" (Jackson 2009, p. 8). Especially, any literature that 'violates' the "dominant assumptions" to "subvert (overtun, upset, and undermine)" existing social "rules and conventions taken to be normative" is fantastic (Jackson, 2009, p. 8). It attempts to "disturb" the conventional "rules" and "representation" of the "real", through its "misrule" it presents "ultimate questions about social order" (Jackson, 2009, p. 9-10). Literary works of this mode are

too “free” to “observe unities of time, space and character”, and does not confine in “three dimensionality with rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death” (Jackson, 2009, p. 1). Fantasy narratives amalgamate both ‘marvellous’ and ‘mimetic’ elements, claim what they are telling is ‘real’, and then they ‘break’ that “assumption of realism” by incorporating “manifestly unreal” terms (Jackson, 2009, p. 20). Correspondingly, Taradas Bandyopadhyay (2019 b) claims the stories of Taranath to be “real” but then the ‘magical’ phenomenon described in the stories break the conventional ‘realism’ in a modern rational world (p. 82). Nevertheless, fantasy is an “enormous and seductive subject” that makes it enigmatic and difficult to define (Jackson, 2009, p. 1). Scholars admit that a vast range of literary works identified as ‘fantastic’ is “too large to constitute a single genre” (Rabkin, 1976, p. 118). It can be incurred from the above discussion that: (i) every fiction is fantastic, (ii) as a mode, fantasy invokes the readers to reexamine their preconceived notions about ‘reality’, (iii) it transgresses and criticizes social practices, class systems, including capitalism, (iv) it exercises freedom of breaking traditional literary styles, (v) and it cocoons various genres due to its enormity and vagueness. Hence, fantasy incorporates various literary genres including horror, science-fiction, surrealism, magic-realism, esotericism, romanticism, etc.

In the beginning, the distinction of “magical realism” from the vaster category “fantastic literature” was quite unclear (Ouyang, 2005, p. 14). The terminological complexities further intensified because of the texts carrying “political or mystifactory” value (Jameson, 1986, p. 129). However, over the years numerous investigations have narrowed down the traits of magic-realist texts providing them more specifications than the mother term, fantasy. “Magical realism,” along with its two other deviants known as “marvellous realism” and “magic realism,” refers to an oxymoronic expression enfolding “the forced relationship of irreconcilable terms,” namely the “magic” and the “real” (Bowers, 2004, p. 1). Scholars encounter difficulties to provide any unifying term or comprehensive definition for this mode of fiction due to its diverse forms of application, distinct yet overlapping concerns, and different etymological records (Bowers, 2004, pp. 1-3). After the 1950s, magical realism as a narrative mode gained scope to encompass all narratives that incorporate “magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative” (Bowers, 2004, p. 2). Magic appears in these narratives as “an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence” (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 3). Therefore, they are accepted, and “integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism” (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 3). Besides, Magical realist fictions are usually set in “rural areas away from influence over, or influence from, the political power centers.” (Bowers, 2004, p. 31). To illustrate, Tantric “magical power” and happenings have been “socially” accepted in Bengal since “primitive” days mostly in the margin (Dr. Bhattacharya, 2000, p. 281). For that reason, Tantra itself is as ‘magic-realist’ as Tricksterism or Shamanism. From a

political viewpoint, the disruptive, accommodative, exploratory, and transgressive spirit innate in magical realist texts has proven their functionality in 'postcolonial' and 'postmodernist' contexts (Bowers, 2004, p. 5-6). The subversive energy radiated by magical realist texts makes them effectively introduce "alternative approaches" to western discourses of reality and objectivity (Bowers, 2004, pp. 1-3). Hence, this narrative technique is a great tool for the writers who want to present native beliefs in magical powers which are contradictory yet no less equal to western concepts about reality. Eminent international authors including Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, and Franz Kafka have experimented with this mode of writing to present their nativism. Furthermore, some notable Bengali writers have also used magical realism in their literature i.e. Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, Humayun Ahmed, Akhtaruzzaman Ilias, Syed Waliullah, and Shahidul Jahir. Magical realism has now become "the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (Bhaba, 2004, p. 7).

How does magic realism function? Firstly, Zamora and Faris argue that this narrative mode "creates a comparative ground where different worldviews may be incorporated non-hierarchically" (qtd. in Mobarak & Istiak, 2020, p. 124). For example, in Taranath Tantrik short stories, the rite of Tantra cures the ill when a medical doctor fails and vice versa. Here, both the healing power of Tantric rites and western medicine are presented as complementary to each other. Secondly, magical realism promotes beliefs that "bind communities together" and "represents grounds for the marginal communities" (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 124). For instance, Taranath often goes to the periphery from the city and helps out marginal people by using Tantra. In the novel, Circle of Fire (অলাতচক্র) the narrator who works in a British merchant office goes to Ramrekha, a remote place in Bihar with his colleagues where they hear from the locals about an "Antelope-Demon" ("পাসাং মারা") who eventually tricks them out of his territory. The incidents disrupt the hierarchy between urban and rustic life and make educated modern people see the world from the marginals' point of view. Thirdly, the surmised boundary between the "reader's reality and the characters' fictionality" is subverted in this narrative (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 124). Fantasy fictions are usually set in "imaginary" places like Hogwarts or Narnia with magical creatures like Centaurs, Dragons, and Satyrs. Contrarily, magic realist narrative uses 'real' places as the setting. In particular, Taranath Tantrik's occult practices take place in 'actual' places like Maut Lane of Kolkata, Train Stations, villages in Birbhum, etc. and the characters are common people. Moreover, despite being a Tantrik, Taranath is a family man who has nostalgia for his childhood, parental affinity for his daughter, and concern about the country's economy. Besides, he is an astrologer, a scholar of Sanskrit, a foodie, and a smoker. He also provides references from religious scriptures about the demons and goddesses he deals with. Overall, Taranath Tantrik's fictionality is inseparable from the reader's reality. Fourthly,

magical realism leaves it to readers to accept the “realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level” (Bowers, 2004, p. 3). Likewise, Bandyopadhyay declares that the stories are real but it is up to the readers to believe them or not. As Bandyopadhyay is widely regarded as a romantic writer and almost all of the esoteric phenomena in the stories are connected to natural entities, an exploration of the fantastic connection between magical realism and romanticism is vital.

I cannot send you my explanation of the word ‘romantic’ because it would be 125 sheets long. (Fredrich Schlegel in a letter to his brother Wilhem qtd. in Ferber, 2010, p. 19)

Romanticism is an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement primarily taken place in 18th century Europe as a protest against contemporary mechanization. Although the Pre-romantics including George Herbert, William Blake, Thomas Gray, and Robert Southey brought romantic themes into literature already, it manifested as a literary genre after the publication of Lyrical ballads in 1798 by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Etymologically, the French ‘romant’ or ‘roman’ produced various adjectives i.e. ‘romantesque’ which refers to the “style preceding gothic” (Ferber, 2010, p. 23). Romantic literature provides vivid imagery of rustic settings while incorporating the feelings of the common man often through supernatural phenomena. For instance, in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” S.T. Coleridge makes the “supernatural appear to be natural in all respect[s]” using methods that are suggestive, psychological, and also sophisticated so that the feelings of mystery can be produced and at the same time horror is experienced by the reader (Rustam, 2020, p. 57). Another example can be taken from Taranath Tantrik stories; the marginal characters’ faith, despair, strengths, weaknesses, and psychology get crystallized when they experience the supernatural, beyond their understanding. As mentioned above, romantic literature creates a mysterious aura and leaves the decision of ‘believing’ the supernatural or the horror up to the readers. However, supernaturalism is not the only common aspect between magical realism and romanticism existing in the stories.

There is a common misconception that “the Romantics were preoccupied with the self, or nature, or love:” whereas “most of them [a]re passionately committed to political causes” (Ferber, 2010, p. 101). The early Romantics had concerns about the “independence of American colonies” (Ferber, 2010, p. 102). Politically they are rebellious towards social inequality, oppression, conservativeness, and encourage individualism and equity. Thus, their poetry emphasizes “individual values against the growing pressures toward mass conformity” (Abrams, 1953, p. 334). They are the first people in English literature to include common, pastoral life and language in literature. Likewise magic realism, margin, rustic life, and inclu

siveness are essential components of this genre. The British Romantics were influenced by the themes of the French revolution; "equity, liberty, and fraternity" (Day, 2004, p. 133). Hence, romanticism is no less "populist" than magical realism and esotericism (Day, 2004, p. 93). Wordsworth (2013), the father of romantic literature in English, criticized an unjust social system that oppresse[s] the poor and turn[s] them into outcasts" (p. 10). Similarly, "class struggle and exploitation of the working class" is addressed in magic realist writings with a 'Marxist undertone' (Mobarak & Istiak, 2020, p. 127). Taranath in his narratives criticizes how the caste system dehumanizes the alleged people of inferior births, and how society segregates the outcast. He also deprecates both the feudal lords and the colonial masters. On one hand, he describes how an exploited farmer's ghost avenges his destitution. On the other hand, he sarcastically hints at how British imperialism is fueled by India's economy. Each part of the stories reflect the writer's magic realist and romantic concerns for social reformation.

The entrance of esoteric or occult or tantra in modern Bengali fantastic literature is through the romantics serving nationalist agenda. Western education, cultural conflicts, advancement of science and technology, economic conditions, etc. opened up a space for "broader socio-religious reforms" in 19th century British India" (Mukhopadhyay, 2015, p. 10). The urgency of "re-examining" the idea of a 'Hindu' and the idea of "India" in "geographical, political, economic, and social" context of the colony gave rise to "multiple socio-cultural movements", which tried to "remodel the conception of Indian spirituality with various approaches" (Mukhopadhyay, 2015, p. 10). These movements were led by Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission, Mahabodhi Society, etc. who "upheld the spiritual modernism of the subcontinent" (Mukhopadhyay, 2015, p. 10). Social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy, a leading member of the Brahma Samaj, was an occult practitioner and he produced books on Tantra based on the "Vedas and Upanishad", as the "seed of Tantra is sown in the Vedas" (B. Chakrabarty, 2022, pp. 10-13). Furthermore, Romantic literary figures in these societies including the Tagores held frequent intellectual discussions on "spiritual and esoteric issues" including 'seances', 'occultism' and 'tantric practices' (Mukhopadhyay, 2015, p. 27). Do the Romantics pursue spirituality? Yes, romantic literature expresses the writer's attempts to "expand spirituality by pursuing the divine soul" like a "mystique" (Saiyara & Istiak, 2022, p. 98). As the prominent Romantic writers introduced esotericism or tantra in modern Bengali literature, their fantastic or magic realist writings did not exclude their romantic approach towards spirituality.

However, it is already discussed that Romantic literature is not the only literary genre that shares common interest with tantra. Esoteric or spirituality or tantra is another common ground through which magic realism can coexist with

Romanticism. The word 'tantra' is rooted in 'tatri' or, 'tantri' meaning "origin of spiritual knowledge" (Singh, 2010, p. 1). Scholars also conceive that from an 'esoteric' point of view, 'tantra' means "the spiritual cult by which divine knowledge is unfolded" (tanyate vistariyate jnanam anena iti tantram) (Singh, 2010, p. 1). It is evident that the rites "prescribed in the tantras" were well-known to the "primitive peoples" in India and beyond (Dr. Bhattacharya, 2000, p. 282). Tantric rites and beliefs embedded in the socio-religious life of the Bengali are "reflected" in their "folklore" and "Baul Songs" through which tantra has "entered" modern Bengali literature (Dr. Bhattacharya, 2000, p. 280). The salient feature of Bengali myths and folklore is the fulfillment of desires through "mantras" or spells, the "supernatural" and "magical practices" (Dr. Bhattacharya, 2000, p. 281). Folklores and myths are considered as the "source" of "Latin American magic-realist novels" (Ganguly, 2018, p. 6). Similarly, the Romantics add "folk", "ancient bonds of community", "organic growth of a "nation", and its "unique culture" in their writings (Ferber, 2010, p. 111). "Pagan Myths" and "polytheistic paganism" has been no less appealing than "christian allegory" to the British Romantics (Ferber, 2010, pp. 81,97). Regardless of religious affiliation, mystical and magical aspects of folklore are essential in magic-realist and romantic texts. In brief, it can be inferred that spirituality, marginality, colonialism-urbanization, thematically binds magical realism and romanticism in Bengali literature to present and promote these spiritual pursuits.

3. Taradas Bandyopadhyay's Magic - Romantic Narrative Mode

The stories in this book are not from my imagination, rather experiences. The days of miracles and supernaturals are not over yet, only sometimes we fail to identify them as miracles—that's it. J.B.S Haldane once said—Truth is not only stranger than we imagine; but stranger than we can imagine. Whether the readers believe them or not, these stories are true. (Bandyopadhyay, 2019 b, p. 82)

Taranath Chakrabarty, the protagonist of the stories, is an occult or Tantrik, and an astrologer in his fifties living in 20th century Mott lane, Kolkata, British India. The anonymous narrator of the story once pays him a visit with a friend as clients but eventually befriends him. Then begins the fictional autobiographical metanarrative of Taranath about his mystical life. The stories of Taranath Tantrik have occasions where 20th century scientific and religious creeds are contrasted by Tantric rituals and their outcomes, establishing the characteristics of magical realism discussed earlier. Tantra is a theological school that has been studied and exercised for thousands of years throughout the subcontinent and beyond. It is a matter of faith for its practitioners. The supernatural is as real as the natural for them. The only difference is that one cannot explain the supernatural. Similarly,

Tantra or spirituality or mysticism has been more than a literary tool for Taradas because his life became entangled with esotericism through his father's mystique explorations. The supernatural and tantric references made in Taranath Tantrik stories cannot be considered as entirely fictional and fantastic. They are magic realist texts because to Taradas, magic was no less real than conventionally perceived reality. Nevertheless, magical realist writings have some reformative agenda that is why concentrating solely on the supernatural occurrences provides only a partial explanation of the work. For instance, in eminent magical realist texts of Kafka, Marquez, and Rushdie, magical realism serves as a tool of counter-discourse against western prejudices and stereotypes. At this point, one may enquire whether it is necessary to call the stories romantic since they carry romantic elements that also exist in magic realist text. One needs to keep in mind that the stories not only incorporate the common themes between magical realism and romanticism but also the uncommon ones i.e. romantic aesthetics and nostalgia. Bandyopadhyay has always carried his Bengali identity with the highest regard which is reflected in every writing of his. He has chosen a Tantrik as his protagonist because Tantra is associated with Bengal, its nature and culture. As a prominent romantic writer he has crafted Taranath Tantrik stories with a colonial setting to uphold the Bengali identity in both urban and rustic settings. For that reason, every Taranath Tantrik story begins on a rainy day during an 'adda' over 'tea' and 'snacks' in the heart of 20th century Kolkata city. Then through the metanarratives, the readers travel across the countryside and witness the natural and cultural richness of Bengal. The following evaluation of two select stories of Bandyopadhyay exemplifies his magic-romantic narrative style.

(i) "Panchamundi Asana" ("পঞ্চমুন্ডির আসন"): An Evaluation

Bandyopadhyay (2019 a) says that "colonial education has made the neocolonialists" ("পাশ্চাত্যের ধ্যান ধারণায় লালিত বাঙালী") "mock native culture and customs" ("বাঙালীর আচার আচরনের প্রতি কটুক্তি বর্ষণ") which is common in any colonial history (p. 15). Taranath Tantrik represents the "patriots who cannot stand" the degradation ("স্বদেশ প্রেমিক মাত্রই বুকে অসহায় জ্বালা অনুভব করে থাকেন") of their native culture by neocolonialists (2019 a, p. 15). Late colonial South Asian magic realist writings emphasize this crisis and substitutes "rationality and logic" (deriving from colonialism and capitalism) with "customs, rituals, and beliefs (representing dominant rural character of India)" (S. Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 199). When Kishori says that Taranath narrates "cock-and-bull story" ("গাজাখুরি গল"), he feels offended and then proceeds with another story with a view to promoting native creeds and culture of the Bengalis (2019 a, p. 186).

The boundary between 'fact and fiction', 'real' and 'magical' remains ambiguous in romantic and magical realist texts. Both narrative modes aim to challenge

fundamentalist views by “putting realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level” (Bowers, 2004, p. 3). The story “Panchamundi Asana” (“পঞ্চমুন্ডির আসন”) revolves around the supernatural encounters of “Sidheshwar Kundu” (“সিদ্ধেশ্বর কুন্ডু”), a grocer and the resolution of his problem with Tantra. In the story, the first night Taranath stays over at Sidheshwar’s home as a guest, Sidheshwar mentions that he has been seeing five living entities (a jackal, a snake, a buffalo, a dog, and a human respectively) in intangible forms inside the compound of his home for a month. In his astonishment, Taranath intervenes indicating that he is acquainted with the case already. How? He does not know. He often says that his Goddess Madhusundari (symbolic to a Tantric Goddess) has blessed him with this gift. He can sense when someone is in danger and see their past, present, and future like an omniscient. The tantric rituals mentioned in these stories have numerous references in the scriptures. For instance, Taranath with Sidheshwar’s assistance talks to the elderly villagers and finds out that, 60 to 65 years ago, a Tantrik dwelled in the same homestead, and suspects that the man used the skulls of those five beings (who’s intangible figure appeared to Sidheshwar) to create a ‘Panchamundi Asana’ for worshipping Goddess Kali (2019 a, p. 187). A Panchamundi Asana is a small throne made with five skulls (often human) on which a Tantrik sits and performs a ‘yogya’ or ‘sadhna’ to awaken a Goddess (Heals). He refers to a sanskrit verse of ‘Yogini Tantra’, and adds that a Tantrik should free a dead being’s soul after incorporating them in a rite with proper burial in the river but this Tantrik may have violated the rule. According to Taranath, the skulls used in the Asana are still buried somewhere in the yard of Sidheshwar’s house and their spirits want him to give them a proper funeral. Taranath’s intuition turns out to be true, establishing his tantric powers, when they dig out the skulls from Sidheshwar’s yard in view of giving them a proper funeral. After the funeral is performed through Tantra, they witness ‘miraculous’ results. Sidheshwar never sees those apparitions in his life again, and the financial condition of the people associated with the funeral improves as foretold by Taranath. The successful outcome of Taranath’s spontaneous measures in this case and his normalized approach towards the supernatural depicts that, to him, ‘Tantra’ or ‘magic’ is no less ‘real’ than ‘conventional reality’.

When Taranath performs a Tantric rite to secure ‘freedom’ of the ‘spirits’, he engages Kamli, a poverty-stricken child, with a view to bringing affluence to her parents. Around a decade after the performance, Sidheshwar meets Taranath in the ‘central market of Kolkata’ and informs him that both he and Kamli’s father have gained prosperity in their respective business areas. Also, he says that Kamli is now a grown woman and she is happy in her married life. Their good fortune as a reward for ‘freeing the spirits’ and their belief in the supernatural amidst ‘urban life’ once again indicate the author’s magic realist intention to promote “non-scientific and non-pragmatic beliefs in a world which is universally influenced by science and

pragmatism" (Bowers, 2004, p. 4). One notable romantic style of Taradas Bandyopadhyay is that he attempts to make an even handed evaluation of rural life like Coleridge. He not only promotes the pros of rustic life but also subtly criticizes its cons. For instance, Taranath says that as he is a Bramhin by birth (allegedly superior caste in Hinduism), upon their first meeting, Sidheshwar asks him (T) to pour water into a clay pot by himself as Sidheshwar, a Kolu (lower caste) is not allowed to touch the edible substances of the Brahmins (Bandyopadhyay, 2019 a, p. 178). Later that night, Sidheshwar makes arrangements for Taranath's dinner but does not dare to cook by himself. Taranath mentions to the narrator that he never feels obliged to abide by the 'caste system' exercised by villagers (2019 a, p. 178). However, he opines on this sensitive matter quite humbly without offending or disrespecting the prevailing customs, expressing this magic-romantic agenda of removing social-hierarchy. He not only glorifies rustic life, but also he constructively criticizes the rustic people for reformation. This style of being critical to social conservatism and discrimination through the caste system in a magic realist text has been exercised by other notable writers as well. For instance, Arundhari Roys's *The God of Small Things* "concerns the caste system" and like Rushdie's it "has a political dimension relating to life in the margins" (Bowers, 2004, p. 53). When Sidheshwar excavates to unearth the skulls, Taranath willingly offers his hands. He does not hesitate to assist his host of so-called 'inferior birth' despite being a guest and a man of 'superior caste', because "magical realist writing in India" is fueled by "socio historical registers" including "caste" and "marginality" (S. Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 207). For instance, in *Kangal Malshat (War-Cry of the Beggars)* Bengali author Nabarun Bhattacharya uses "magical realism to comment on caste-based marginality" (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 207). As discussed earlier, magic realist and romantic writings do not endeavor to make the reader believe in miracles, rather they leave some mystery unexplained. Nevertheless, the narrator in the beginning of the story accounts that when the readers study Coleridge's texts i.e. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", they get prepared for any 'magical' occurrence through a "willing suspension of disbelief" (Bandyopadhyay, 2019 a, p. 175).

ইউরোপে হিটলার যুদ্ধ করেছে তার সঙ্গে তার সঙ্গে আমাদের দেশি তরকারির বাজারের লাউ কুমড়া উচ্ছে মুলোর দাম বেড়ে যাবার কি কারণ? হিটলারের সৈন্যদল কি সুজো খায়? না লাউয়ের ঘন্ট? (Bandyopadhyay, 2019 a, p. 177)

Anti-industrialization and anti-materialism are common themes in Romantic literature whereas magical realist texts are anti-colonial. Similarly, Taranath Tantrik short stories are also filled with 'anti-industrial', 'anti-material', and 'anti-colonial' elements. He rhetorically inquires to the narrator why the WWII (যুদ্ধ) is affecting the increasing price of kitchen market commodities (লাউ কুমড়া উচ্ছে মুলো) in Bengal, does German soldiers (হিটলারের সৈন্যদল) eat Bengali cuisines (সুজো, লাউয়ের

ঘন্ট)? This rhetoric is a criticism of colonial exploitation and commonly present in 'Magical-marxist' texts. Moreover, he says that the organic food i.e. "puffed rice" of Bengal has also lost its "authenticity" to "commercial goods" (2019 a, p. 179). He further criticizes the impact of industrialization and laments that both rural and urban people are neglecting their spiritual pursuits for material pursuits (2019 a, p. 179).

Wordsworth says in Preface to Lyrical Ballads (2013) on Romantic literature that in the rustic settings, "rural occupations" are "more easily comprehended", "are more durable" and "passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (p. 3). Similarly, Taranath says in the story:

রান্না করবার সময় সিদ্ধেশ্বর কাছে বসে গল্প করতে লাগল। গ্রামের বাইরে কোথাও শয়োলরে দল ডাকছে। এখনো সেসব কথা মনে পড়লে বুক হুহু করে। কতদিন গ্রামেরে সেই রূপ দেখিনা। মানুষের জীবন পল্লীগ্রামেই রয়েছে, বুঝলে? শহরে কেবল জীবিকার জন্য থাকা। ভালো লাগেনা, তবু মেনে নিতে হয়। (Bandyopadhyay, 2019 a, p. 181)

This comment depicts the astrologer's 'nostalgia for rural life' as he, likewise Wordsworth, believes that human life (জীবন) becomes essentially ideal (আসল) if incorporated with 'nature'. He reminisces Sidheshwar giving him company (কাছে বসে গল্প করতে লাগল) while he cooks for himself. Meanwhile, he hears a pack of jackals calling (শয়োলরে দল ডাকছে) from the outskirts of the village. He elaborates the beauty (গ্রামেরে সেই রূপ) of village life not only "lies" in its nature but also in its culture. While talking about Sidheshwar's hospitality, he mentions the village tradition of being a 'good host'. Moreover Taranath complements fresh organic foods i.e. "curd", "banana", "puffed rice", etc. available in villages (2019 a, p. 189). He laments over again that "urban" life does not delight him at all and he is here only for bread and butter (জীবিকার জন্য থাকা). Taranath's account indicates that capitalization has uprooted the 'Bengalis' from their real homes and gradually they are forgetting their real culture and tradition. His motivation for providing a detailed description in a nostalgic tone becomes clearer when he asks the narrator whether he "realizes" ("বুঝলে") that the "Bengalis have lost" ("আমরা হারিয়ে ফেললাম") "a lot of good things" ("অনেক ভালো জিনিস") that were "native" to them ("নিজের দেশেরে") (2019 a, p. 171). As the story is set in the colonial era and written in the post-colonial era, this promotion of nativism is common both in magical realist writings and the writings of Bengali Romantics i.e. Tagore. Magic realist writings tend to shed light on a colonized's original features getting erased with the course of colonialism. Not only Bengali but also Latin American magic realist writings address "colonial-capitalist modernity", "rural regional aesthetic styles", and "the imposition of capitalist injunctions on pre-capitalist societies" (S. Bhattacharya, 2020, pp. 199-200). Wordsworth has expressed the same concern and feared that "the world with its getting

and spending is ruining our kinship with nature" (Ferber, 2010, p. 106). This magic-romantic issue is expressed by Taranath that modern Bengalis "are neglecting" ("বড়ই উপেক্ষা করছি") their "emotional needs" ("চিত্তকে") for the "lure of money" ("বিত্তের মোহে") (Bandyopadhyay, 2019 a, p. 178).

In the embedded narrative, Taranath provides a vivid imagery of his surroundings, especially nature, which is a salient feature of any Romantic literary work. The visual imagery of Sidheshwar's grocery shop illustrates that it is placed in the secluded outskirts of "Kholshopot" ("খলসেপাতা") under "a gigantic Jackfruit tree" ("বিরিচ কাঠাল গাছের তলায়") during twilight (Bandyopadhyay, 2019 a, p. 178). In addition to that, he also shares amalgamated auditory imagery of a "bird" ("পাখি") chirping and a "shepherd's melody" ("রাখালের চড়া গলার গান"), with their locations and kinesthetic positions respectively (Bandyopadhyay, 2019 a, p. 178). The next morning, the melody of a magpie-robin wakes up Taranath (184). He adds that the bird was 'singing' from a branch of "a fig tree" ("বাঁকড়া ডুমুর গাছে") and "as if he could still listen to it" ("এখনো যেন সেই মিষ্টি ডাক ভেসে আসছে") (2019 a, p. 184). Different components of this description individually represent the treasures of village life and they collectively sketch a typical dusk before industrialization. The shepherd in the story returns home in a cheering mood. A small grocery shop owner has his own tranquil workplace. They may not have a lot of capital but they lead a peaceful independent life. Perhaps these characters are contrasted with the narrator and his friend Kishory in the story who represent the middle class urban men whose mechanized life leaves them exhausted and secluded from the healing power of nature. This might be the writer's message to those who think that imperialism has 'civilized' and advanced the standard of living in their colony. Once again, a romantic description is serving a political purpose of magic realism.

In this story, the writer has used magical and romantic elements inseparably. Taranath's 'Tantric' references, performances, and results promote the alleged 'non-pragmatic' native creeds and customs in a colonial and capitalized setting. He critiques both socio-religious and colonial exploitation prevailing in India and erases the stratum between margin and center. Simultaneously, he romantically establishes the significance of human-nature relationship. The juxtaposition of these two literary modes creates Bandyopadhyay's own magic-romantic narrative.

(ii) Taranath Tantrik and Brahma Pishach (তারানাথ তান্ত্রিক ও ব্রহ্মপিশাচ): An Evaluation

In the beginning of the story, when the narrator argues whether Taranath can control rainfall, Taranath proves that not only rain, he can also predict and prevent earthquakes. He then refers to "Agama" ("আগমতন্ত্র") a Tantrik school that deals with cosmology. Taranath in his earlier days witnessed mass killings in an earthquake. For that reason, he uses his supernatural power to lessen the intensity of earthquakes as

he believes that "nothing is greater than an act of kindness" (Bandyopadhyay, 2019 c, p. 210). Taranath's use of Tantra or 'magic' in this case is evident to be 'real' as the other characters bear witness to the outcome. All three people present in Taranath's room, the anonymous narrator, his friend Ashwiny, and Taranath reminisces the 12th (Saturday) of the Bengali month Ashar. Taranath asks them if they had any unusual experience in the afternoon and the narrator remembers that after office, past 2:30 pm, he was smoking a cigarette while waiting at the tram stop. Suddenly, he felt discomfort under his feet. He removed his shoes to check if anything was wrong but found nothing. He looked across the street and saw a stranger doing the same thing. His friend Ashwiny adds that he had the same experience as well. He was at the train station having a salted cucumber, but he didn't notice the people around him. Why has the writer thrown a 'salted cucumber' in such a serious discussion? It is a salient feature of Bengali romantic literature to delight the readers and provide imagery that helps one to visualize beauty in the most ordinary things. Anyhow, Taranath then explains that at the midnight of 11th, when he was praying to his Goddess Madhusundari as part of his routine, she prophesied to him that an earthquake is about to take place in south-eastern Bengal; Taranath remembers a deadly earthquake in Bihar, and then performs a special Tantric ritual to minimize the effect of the calamity. Hearing this, the narrator asks that any earthquake regardless of scale is supposed to be caught in scientists' seismographs; why was this case an exception? Taranath replies that there was nothing exceptional about this case. This earthquake is surely recorded in seismographs but they did not make news out of it because of the scale being so low. He adds that hundreds of earthquakes take place across the globe but most of them are not strong enough to be on the news. Preventing a natural phenomenon like 'earthquake' by controlling natural energy / power / elements is still unknown to modern science but Taranath's performance of Tantric ritual, a methodology unknown to 'science' in 'reality' is indeed magic realist as Bowers (2004) says that magical realism provides "another way of knowing things" (2019 c, p. 81). The experiences of the characters at the same time in different settings indicates that Taranath was not bluffing. The appeal of the earthquake to take place and Taranath's controlling it has a reasonable explanation.

After a tea break, Taranath starts narrating a story of one of his clients. He remembers a 20 to 22 years old case beginning with a 30 to 32 years old ordinary middle class man at his doorstep. Taranath comprehends that the man is in danger because of two reasons. Firstly, the man looks scared and confused as if something beyond his understanding has happened to him. He has seen this helplessness in people's eyes before. Secondly, by the power bestowed upon him by Goddess Madhusundari, he can sense when the people around him are in danger. He always tries to use this power to help others. However, he invites the man to sit and asks, "Did it start with cooking rice?" The man becomes astonished and attempts to prostrate

before him. Taranath immediately grabs his shoulders and discourages him to do so. He tells the man (who later says his name Ronoda Charan Ghosh) to have patience and suggests that one should always have steadfast faith in God in every difficulty. In every story, Taranath expresses his trust in God's power and mercy, and recommends the same to others. He never takes advantage of people's helplessness. He tries to understand and solve every matter as a student of theology with honesty, empathy and transparency. Moreover, he also understands that it is hard for the common people to have faith in an invisible God. He is a spiritualist and a realist at the same time because both are inseparable to him.

Magical realism is a kind of realism, but is quite different from the realism that is mostly accepted in our day-to-day world. It is not speculative and does not conduct thought experiments. Instead, it tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective. (Dash, 2014, p. 222)

Ronoda Charan accounts that he and his family are having unbelievable experiences for a month and a half in their village. He sees a nightmare every other night, he has lost his sense of time, and his mother and wife fail to cook dishes every two days for supernatural reasons. All of their endeavors get stuck half way for which they cannot find any 'rational' explanation. For instance, one day, his mother and wife found insects crawling out of fresh vegetables (2019 c, p 215). Another time, despite trying with different matches, Ronoda's mother couldn't light fire for her evening prayer. Besides, she heard a "raven" ("দাঁড়কাক") croaking at night on a Neem tree (2019 c, p. 216). Usually crows or ravens caw at night only if there's a predator nearby, and in world mythology, it is a symbol of "misery, hunger, and death" and "sandness" in (Krol & Hernik, 2020, p. 3). Modern people find these beliefs superstitious but Taradas Bandyopadhyay has presented this rural myth and justified it to establish native creed, myths, and culture. Why? Because, usually Indian magic realist narrative style "embraces all mythologies" to "activate an essentially plural or secular conception of Indianness" (Bowers, 2004, p. 52). Moreover, when Ronoda Charan informs Taranath about his situation sitting in front of him, Taranath sees a dark shadow clustering behind Ronoda. Taranath deduces the reason behind all of this is 'Brahmapishach' but does not disclose it immediately. Instead, he gives Ronoda an amulet for temporary protection, notes down his address, and asserts that he will go there and perform a 'yogya' or tantric rite on Krishna Chaturdashi (29th lunar day).

At this point of the story, when the narrator asks Taranath about his deduction, Taranath refers to select tantric scriptures and says that Brahmapishach is "an invisible harmful energy of nature" (2019 c, p. 219). He adds that Ronoda and his

family's encounter with this natural entity is a 'highly probabilistic accident' (2019 c, p. 219). It is like slipping on a banana peel, probable and unfortunate. He adds that those who get intertwined with this natural entity (Brahmapishach), get hurt along with their close ones. Ranada's is the second case of this sort in Taranath's career. In his youth, he was traveling on foot across Nadia district, took shelter at a random home for the night, and learnt that the whole family was entangled with Brahmapishach. Taranath performed the respective rites and rescued them from the misery. These incidents happened on broad day lights concerning multiple characters. Their collective witness proves that the 'magical' happenings are no less 'real' than reality itself. Any individual educated in western education might have explained the situation as merely "coincidental" but Taranath blames Brahmapishach for the happenings because Bowers (2004) says that "magical realism provides" for the writers "a means for" expressing "a non-dominant or non-western perspective" from a "rural standpoint, in opposition to dominant cultural discourse" (p. 97).

On the appointed day, Taranath goes to Ronoda's village named Ramnagar. Ronoda informs him that his amulet has kept them protected, only he had the same dream last night. Taranath then explains everything to him, and tells him that the last stage of Brahmapishach's effect is starvation to death. The next night, he performs a 'yogya' or 'tantra' on the rooftop of Ronoda's house starting from 10. Gradually Taranath and Ronoda smell a hypnotizing extraterrestrial odor. Taranath immediately takes protective measures through tantra which removes the smell from the atmosphere. At the end of the rituals, both of them see a dark green thumb coming out of the fire of the 'yogya' which is the visible form of Brahmapishach. Taranath then recites "Kshepani mantra" pointing his finger at the thumb. Then it flies away to the sky, and disappears. After a month, Ranada comes to Kolkata and informs Taranath that everything has gone back to normal. This unexplainable experience of Ronoda, immediate Taranath's deduction of the supernatural case, and bringing a solution to the problem through tantra establishes Taranath's Tantrik rituals as real. The appearance of Brahma Pishach in the form of a luminous thumb also proves that everything Taranath claimed throughout the story is true.

Underneath many of the 'nature' poems.....is the familiar conviction that nature is beautiful and full of joy; that man is corrupted by civilization; that God may be found in nature; and that the study of nature not only brings pleasure, therefore, but generates moral goodness. (Mayo, 1954, p. 490)

Ronoda, even being scared of unexplainable experiences on his first meeting with Taranath, does not compromise his Romanticism. When he introduces himself to Taranath, he gives a vivid description of his village and expresses his

passion for rustic life. He says that they have been living in Ramnagar (রামনগর) village for five generations and he loves it there. He is a peace-loving person, hence he does not like urban life (শহরে ধরনধারণ). Wherever he goes back on business, he returns to his village as soon as he can. He then describes the beauty of Ramnagar. It has rich crop fields, gardens of fruits, and giant trees. A river, Kamalakshi, passes through their village and he finds it fresh, cool, and sacred. Taranath then praises his Bangla accent, says that he doesn't sound rustic, and asks about his educational qualification. Ronoda replies that he has passed matriculation only but he has always been fond of Bangla literature, especially stories and novels. He has read all of Rabindranath, Bankimchandra, and Saratchandra. They did not have a library in Ramnagar back then, so he used to bring books from Kolkata. Still he brings books from town by mail. What kind of a person speaks this way when their life is jeopardized? He passionately talks about rural life even when he is horrified due to the attack of Brahma Pishach because he is highly Romantic. Besides, when Taranath visits Ramnagar village he also appreciates the richness and beauty (আম কাঠালের ছায়ার ঘেরা বেশ স্নিগ্ধ) of the village (2019 c, p. 222).

Taradas Bandyopadhyay has plotted this story by throwing the 'supernatural' at a 'romantic's' life. He has made magical happenings occur with multiple characters all while expressing the appeal of rural life over urban life. Tantric performances and their outcomes in these stories do not have scientific explanations as Bowers (2004) says that 'magical realist' writings do not necessarily include the magic as a "magic show" rather 'magic' refers to "any extraordinary occurrence, and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science" (p.19).

3. Conclusion

The metanarratives in "Taranath Tantrik and Brahma Pishach" ("তারানাথ তান্ত্রিক ও ব্রহ্মপিশাচ") and "Panchamundi Asana" ("পঞ্চমুন্ডির আসন") transgress fundamentalist views, criticize social normatives, and destabilize social hierarchy, that leave the readers at wonder through an interplay of magic and reality mingling the common themes between magic-realism and romanticism resulting in a unique narrative mode. The (i) presentation of the 'supernatural' in a 'natural' setting to make the readers' reexamine their disbelief on Tantra, (ii) disruption of the hierarchy between central and marginal life, and (iii) demonstration of political and social exploitation unifies magic realism and romanticism which becomes transparent through esoteric events in Taranath's life. A close observation of the stories epitomizes the cohabitation of magical realism and romanticism, depicting his magic-romantic narrative mode. In brief, the characteristic and thematic commonalities between Magic realism and Romanticism allow them to form a fantastic narrative mode in Bengali through Tantra.

Note

All Bengali texts quoted in the paper are translated into English by the author of this paper.

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