MAGICAL REALISM AND META-FICTION IN PAKISTANI ANGLOPHONE FICTION: A POSTMODERN STUDY OF HUSSAIN'S *ANOTHER GULMOHAR TREE*

Mehwish Akbar
Visiting faculty, Department of English, UON Narowal. Email: mehwishakbar.193@gmail.com
Rizwan Mustafa
Visiting faculty, Department of English, UON Narowal. Email: tomustafapk@gmail.com
Abeera Shoukat
Associate Lecturer, Department of English, UON Narowal. Email: abeera.saqib@uon.edu.pk

Abstract
This study examines Another Gulmohar Tree as a symbolic character in Aamer Hussein's novella within the framework of postmodern literary theory. A vibrant and fleeting South Asian tree, the Gulmohar serves as a complex metaphor for memory, displacement, and the breakdown of identity. The present study investigates two postmodern stylistic features: magical realism and metafiction. Taking Gulmohar tree as a symbol, this study illustrates how Hussein employs natural imagery to construct a narrative that reveals postmodern elements. Ultimately, the novella stands as a subtle yet meaningful example of postmodern South Asian writing, notably characterised by metafiction and magical realism. The research is important because it enhances understanding of how to interpret the selected text. The findings indicate that Pakistani literature in English contains postmodern features, and fictional narratives can be analyzed in accordance with postmodern critical theory.
Keywords: Another Gulmohar Tree, Postmodernism, Magical Realism, Metafiction

1. Introduction

Pakistani literature in English has gained prominence and Pakistani writers, immigrants and/or anglophones, have validated their contribution to world literature. Aamer Hussein is an award-winning British-Pakistani writer who has written twelve collections of stories, two novels, a memoir and a collection of essays. His short novel *Another Gulmohar Tree* is different in style and story construction. This fictional work is divided into three parts: the first deals with traditional folktales, the second deals with the beginning of the plot in London, and the third part covers the journey of the characters to Karachi, Pakistan. The first part of the novella talks about three fragmented folktales. The first one is the tale of Usman and a frog. Usman, while sitting Gulmohar tree, feeds a frog, and it gives him golden coins in return. The second tale is about a sacrificed young girl who mistakenly pokes one of the crocodiles. She is made to become the wife of the Crocodile king. The third story is about another girl, Rokeya, who finds a wild deer on her lawn and befriends it. She decides to keep it at her house but ultimately it leaves Rokeya in dismay. All three tales look irrelevant, but later on, one learns that these are linked with the identity and displacement of the characters and the plot. The second part deals with the beginning of the love story between Usman and Lydia. Usman, in his forties and Lydia, in her thirties, meet at a symposium at the University of London. They get closer later on, though they are already married. They spent time together and then Usman left London for Pakistan. They kept in touch with each other through letters. In the novel's third part, Lydia moves to Pakistan, where she finds Usman. Both are dissatisfied with their marital lives and decide to marry each other. Usman changed her name to Rokeya after converting to Islam. She abandons all the traces of her previous life and identity by shedding the English clothing for Pakistani dress.

The selected work deals with multiple themes such as displacement, delusion and accommodability. The theme of displacement can be explored in the novel through characters such as Lydia. After spending many years as a dissatisfied wife and an isolated woman, she moves from London to Pakistan. She is displaced from her origin to a new place to find belonging and identity. The novel seems to be a journey from deluded Lydia, a self-deceived woman, to delusional Rokeya, a real Pakistani woman. The crocodile girl, who misapprehends her future as a wife of the Crocodile king and Lydia, as the author narrates, takes Usman analogous to a crocodile. Similarly, Usman feels like a 'ghost in the rain' (2009, p.51) because he was alone in London and may have been taking the British or the Londoners as aliens to him, but Lydia, a stranger, met him and made his stay pleasant. Accommodability and adaptability are two of the themes of this novel. Lydia falls in love with Usman while they meet up in London. She used to think about him even after he left England. She becomes flexible enough to accept a few things about Usman, such as his religion, 'evidently means something' (53) to him and his humane nature and inclination to egalitarian values. Even being alien to life in Karachi, she sacrifices her British identity to pursue satisfaction and peace. Thus, she manages to become a happy wife of Usman because of her accommodating nature and adaptability.

Aamer Hussain has presented some of his autobiographical elements in the novel. He shows different characters who strive for identity but taking characters compositely, one can find Lydia and Usman equal to the author himself. Aamer was born in Karachi and he used to live in India but he finally moved to England. Still, he keeps on moving from one country to another. Usman moves to London and then returns to his roots but Lydia, a British version of Rokeya, remains dissatisfied while living as a Londoner. She leads a satisfactory life as Rokeya in Pakistani society. Hence, the author, who equates himself to Lydia and Usman, feels at home in Pakistan.

As for as postmodernism is concerned, the selected text is filled with many elements that are related to the said theory. Postmodernism is defined as a revolt against the old notions of modernism. It is something about deconstructing those ideas and arguments previously given by modernism. It is a literary theory in which techniques like irony, humor and intertextuality are employed to derive the meanings from the text. It seems to be something that is associated with skepticism and reason. Along with postcolonialism, postmodernism has become the sole voice for the oppressive community.

In postmodernism, a technique is used to question the nature of reality. That particular technique is named metafiction. It is something that is related to the construction of the stories. Using this tool, the writer presents himself as a character of the story but pretends as if they are not. Usually, the characters address the subject of the story directly. Using this method, the writer usually judges the construction of language and its perception in the audience or the readers, as they are interested in constructing the meaning. Another Gulmohar tree has the elements of both postmodernism and metafiction. The novela is filled with fragmented structures and has different perspectives on storytelling. The main character in the novella is Usman, a translator and writer. His life revolves around different narratives and languages. The story moves around different times and memories, having no straightforward plot.

Another Gulmohar Tree can be explored using a postmodern lens. Moreover, there is a significant research gap, particularly when applying postmodernism to Pakistani literature in English. The present study aims to explore two postmodern features, like magical realism and metafiction, in one of the famous writers of Pakistani literature in English, Aamer Hussein.

2. Literature Review

Aamer Hussain, a Pakistani British novelist, storywriter, critic, academic and translator, is popular among academics and readers. He was born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan but since the 1970s, he has lived in England. He studied at the School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London, where he teaches Urdu. He is a member of the British Royal Literary Society and has been a prolific contributor to the book pages of the national press and literary journals. He has held various posts at universities in the UK, including as the Postcolonial Writing Fellow at Southampton University in 2000. His works include four collections of short stories and two novels.

Hussein's *Another Gulmohar Tree* has been studied using a narratological model theorized by Roland Barthes as a framework in a crical study A Structural Manifestation of Barthes's Five Codes in Hussein's Another Gulmohar Tree and 'the study results showed that all five codes, which are hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes, are present in the text' (Rehman & Saeed, 2025).

Abbas and Gohar have critically analyzed *Another Gulmohar Tree* and explored 'the theme of identity crisis by applying the Theory of Hybridity and Third Space given by Homi K. Bhabha' (2023, p.117). Thus, the selected texts have been studied to explore various postmodern and postcolonial thematic features.

Another Gulmohar Tree, by Aamer Hussain is a relatively short novel (Novella) published in 2009. According to Ruth Pandel, 'A lovely, strange and very moving novel' (2022). Kamila Shamsie considers it a love tale 'into which Hussein weaves all his remarkable storytelling skills' (2022). It is the story of Lydia and Usman Khan. The title includes the Gulmohar tree, which does not belong to the subcontinent but grows easily in the soil and climatic conditions of the region. Only a tree can grow and blossom if the soil and climate suit it. Lydia, a main character, gets herself implanted in Pakistan and succeeds in growing a family and raising her children as the society is welcoming and flexible enough to create room for a foreigner like her. Over time, she is deeply rooted in Pakistani society like Gulmohar tree does. Thus, Lydia seems like a Gulmohar *tree* planted at another place.

Another Gulmohar Tree has been reviewed multiple times, and scholars and researchers have been researching it. Still, there is a significant research gap and it can be filled by exploring the postmodernist elements. This novel could be one of the representative works of Pakistani Anglophone literature.

3. Analysis of *Another Gulmohar Tree*

Hussain's *Another Gulmohar Tree* can be analyzed and interpreted using various lenses. The text may be interpreted and analyzed by considering the theories such as re-orientalism and/or postmodernism. Aamer Hussain's *Another Gulmohar Tree* seems to be a postmodern novel as it has postmodern features such as metafiction and magical realism.

a. Magical Realism

This term was first coined by the German writer Franz Roh in 1925 and later evolved into a distinct literary genre. Often associated with the literary works of Latin Americans. Magical realism as a literary device appreciates the introduction of impossible or unrealistic events into a narrative that is otherwise realistic. Magical realism paints the modern realistic view by infusing or embedding the magical, fantasy, mythic, and supernatural elements, side by side, into the literary works. Postmodern fictions, like many other features, also make good use of magical realism, thus

incorporating the texts with the supernatural elements, in a very natural/realistic manner/tone. Thus, it follows extraordinary and unique plot structures.

Magical or Magic realism, as Encyclopedia Britannica states, is 'characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction' (2021). So, within a work of magical realism, the world is still grounded in the real world, but fantastical elements are considered normal in this world. The novel under discussion has elements of magical realism, particularly in the first part of the novel. All three stories in the first part of the novel highlight magical realism. Usman's relation with the eccentric frog displays that a frog, a real creature who cannot talk or give golden coins, showers coins on him, which is a magical-realistic act. Secondly, a crocodile turning human green and marrying a girl is an act that can be called a magical-realistic act. Lastly, there is the story of a deer that befriends a girl, talks to her and starts living with her. These three mythical stories show magical realism in the novel.

Nature mirrors the emotions and sentiments as a character role when a tree is connected with an individual's emotions, 'The gulmohar tree seemed to flower only in the moments of joy and wither in the times of silence between us, as though tethered to our emotions' (Hussein, 2009).

b. Metafiction

William H. Gass coined the term metafiction in his essay published in 1970 with the title *Philosophy and the Form of Fiction*. Unlike the anti-novel or the anti-fiction, metafiction is specifically the fiction about fiction. Thus, it deliberately reflects upon itself. Metafiction is a literary device used self-consciously and systematically to draw attention to a work's status as the work of imagination rather than reality. It poses questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, and for this purpose, it usually uses irony and self-reflection. Like the presentational theatre, metafiction does not let the audience forget it is viewing a play. Metafiction forces readers to be aware that they are reading a fictional work.

Metafiction is a postmodern feature the author has used as a writing style. It is, in simple words, fiction about fiction, i.e. fiction which self-consciously reflects upon itself. (Salinger, 2022) Sometimes, a story is inserted within the text that apparently has no connection with the plot but later reveals that it impacts it. For example, the first part of *Another Gulmohar Tree* has three folktales that do not connect with the plot. The main plot revolves around two characters Usman and Lydia but the folktales, later on, have a significant impact on the story and the Gulmohar tree plays the role of a connecting force. Moreover, as DJ Salinger (2022) states 'Meta-fiction is a type of fiction that addresses the fact that it is fiction. Usually fiction pretends that it is real.' (*shmoop.com*) Thus, the very first part of the novel covers the metafictional elements. Further, Patricia Waugh (1984) suggests that metafictional works, 'explore a theory of writing fiction through the practice of writing fiction' (Waugh, 1984). The novel takes into account the process and practice of writing fiction. For example, in the second part (chapter 8) of the novel Rokeya, an artist, tells that she has written a story about a bored young woman who agrees to spend some hours at the beach with one of her friends' (Hussein, 2009, p.81). In the same part of the novel, Usman also tells the story of his novel, published before the partition. Usman's novel covers 'the story of a youth who travels from rural Punjab to Delhi and Lahore; he falls in love with a rich, lovely Begali Kayastha girl'. (Hussein, 2009, p.93) It also covers another story by Usman about a Western anthropologist. (Hussein, 2009, p.99) Another story is discussed by Usman about a bored woman who, in her husband's absence, agrees to spend time at the seaside with a male acquaintance.' (Hussein, 2009, p.105). The text acknowledges narrative construction when a character states, 'I write, knowing well that I am piecing together fragments' (Hussein, 2009). The

selected text also challenges the narrative reliability, saying, 'What was memory but another fiction, another translation' (Hussein, 2009). Hence, the novel has metafictional elements.

Summing up the discussion, it can be said that *Another Gulmohar Tree* by Aamer Hussain is a postmodern novel because it features postmodern features such as magical realism and metafiction. Magical realism can be explored in the first part of the novel, whereas metafictional elements prevail throughout the text.

4. Conclusion

The writers of Pakistani literature in English are competing with world literary figures. The writers worldwide are experimenting with/on their creative writing skills using/following contemporary traditions and movements. *Another Gulmohar Tree* by Aamer Hussain is a representative postmodern work from Pakistani Anglophonic literature. This novel has postmodern elements such as metafiction and magical realism. The postmodern analysis of the novel will help the readers and researchers understand the text. By interpreting the novel with the above-mentioned concepts, the researcher has tried to make the text understandable for future researchers.

Works cited:

Abbas, S., & Gohar, S. (2023). Another Gulmohar Tree–A Tale of Identity and Hybridity. *Journal of English Language, Literature and Education*, *5*(1), 117-140.

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2021, June 19). magic realism. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/art/magic-realism

Hussein, A., 2009. *Another Gulmohar Tree*. 1st ed. UK: Telegram

Kristeva, J. (1980). Desire in language: a semiotic approach to literature and art. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 66. ISBN 0231048068. OCLC 6016349

Padel, R., 2022. Another Gulmohar Tree – Saqi Books. [online] Saqi Books. Available at: <https://saqibooks.com/books/telegram/another-gulmohar-tree/> [Accessed 24 April 2022].

Shamsie, K., 2022. *Another Gulmohar Tree – Saqi Books*. [online] Saqi Books. Available at: <https://saqibooks.com/books/telegram/another-gulmohar-tree/> [Accessed 24 April 2022].

Salinger, J., 2022. Literature Glossary - Metafiction. [online] Shmoop.com. Available at: <https://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/metafiction.html> [Accessed 24 April 2022].

Rehman, M., & Saeed, A. (2025). A Structural Manifestation of Barthes's Five Codes in Hussein's Another Gulmohar Tree. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*, *9*(1), 86-95.

Waugh, P., 1984. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen