

Lemonade of Magic and Reality: An Analysis of Magical Realism in Sanjena Sathian's Gold Diggers

Tushita Choudhary

Independent Scholar

Abstract

Gold Diggers by Sanjena Sathian is a magical realist novel that revolves around a generation of America-born Indians and narrates their real-life lived experiences as immigrants in a magical realist manner. This paper finds that Sathian's writing showcases the extraordinary to be as commonplace as the ordinary in its attempt to present the postcolonial angst that continues amongst Indian diaspora. It combines the understanding of magical realism in Latin American and African literary works and incorporates the magical realist features of traditional Indian folklore and myths as well, connecting the American experience to the 'Indianness' that perpetuates amongst the immigrants. This essay further discusses the novel's use of religious myths from Hinduism and Tantrism, along with ideological myths of model minority and the American dream that combine with the reality of an individual navigating their self-identity. A magical lemonade, concocted through a mystical ancient Indian alchemic ritual, enhances one's capabilities by using gold, an element that emerges in the novel as an allegory for ambition and a means to make the mythical American dream an actual reality for the aspirational immigrants across generations.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Postcolonial literature, Diaspora, Indianess, American dream

The debut novel of the American-Indian author Sanjena Sathian, *Gold Diggers* was published in 2021. Described as ‘a sprawling tale of magical realism, gold heists and the quest to attain the American dream,’ *Gold Diggers* is a coming-of-age story of Neeraj (Neil) Narayan, a second-generation Indian immigrant living in Atlanta, Georgia (PopSugar Review, 2021). Set in the Bush-era, the novel revolves around a generation of America-born Indians and deals with the idea of ‘Indianness’ from a diasporic perspective, exploring the continuity of the ‘Indianness’ that shapes the lives of generations of Indians across the world through their culture. The central themes of the novel include excessive ambition and the question of a hybrid identity, and uses both religious and ideological myths to discuss the real experiences of American-Indians, depicting their extraordinary magical reality. In other words, it narrates their real-life lived experiences as immigrants in a magical realist manner. This essay examines the elements of magical realism in *Gold Diggers* and identifies these for their ‘Indianness’, a characteristic that distinguishes the novel from other magical realist literary works, such as Latin American and African-American postcolonial narratives.

To narrate an everyday bizarre reality of a postcolonial society where the supernatural coexists with the natural, magical realism in postcolonial literature emerges as a way of showing the extraordinary to be as commonplace as the ordinary in these societies. Warnes and Sasser succinctly define magical realism as ‘a mode or a style – sometimes a genre – of writing in which magical elements are presented alongside realistic ones as if there were no difference of kind between them’ (Warnes & Sasser, 2020, p.1). Comprised of the oxymorons ‘magic’ and ‘real’, the term ‘magical realism’ becomes a way of presenting this strange experience which

could neither be narrated through the rational realism nor the irrational fantastical. Being neither of the two, and yet being both of them at the same time, the term Magical Realism has been much debated among critics of art and literature in the twentieth century.

The term Magical Realism can be traced back to the German historian Franz Roh's *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* (After Expressionism: Magic Realism), published in 1925, and his idea of Post-Expressionism, a new art style that emerged in the 1920s in response to a declining trend in both Impressionism and Expressionism (Roh, 1925, p.19). Moreover, synchronous to Post-Expressionism, another German historian Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub introduced a similar idea of a new realism and termed it *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). However, magical realism, for both Roh and Hartlaub, was understood within and remained limited to visual arts. It was only after José Ortega y Gasset brought out a Spanish translation of Roh's writing and published it in *Revista de Occidente* in 1927 titled *Realismo mágico: post expresionismo* (Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism), interestingly reversing the German title and thereby emphasising the term Magic Realism as it spread through Latin America, that the term came to be associated with literary works (Guenther, 1995, p.61). Other Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier followed pursuit, developing Magical Realism into the genre it has now come to represent: a narrative of an unquestioned coexistence of the natural and the supernatural, the real and the magical.

In the Indian context too, Magical Realism provides a way for authors to express postcolonial experiences and acquaint people with the different realities of the colonised through bizarre narratives of extraordinary events occurring in ordinary settings. However, as Ann Bowers observes, and I agree, the genre has gradually become excessively associated with Latin American literature and its expression of a 'New World reality' (Bowers, 2004, p.117). I argue

that while many postcolonial Indian writings like *Gold Diggers* and *Midnight's Children* are considered magical realist and may be compared to postcolonial Latin American magical realist narratives, they contain a distinct 'Indianness' and carry a legacy of traditional folklore and religious mythology that sets them apart. The evolution of magical realist novels in India, therefore, is a confluence of a) European and Latin American understandings of magical realism and b) the traditional Indic literature of folklore, fantasy and mythology. *Gold Diggers* is one such example of a magical realist narrative of the real-life experiences of a postcolonial society that cannot be understood within the bounds of Western rationality.

Similar to Salman Rushdie's writings, which Manav Ratti in *Religious and Ideological Mythologies in Salman Rushdie's Novels* observes to comprise both religious and ideological myths, I find that *Gold Diggers* discusses a magical reality where religious myths from Hinduism and Tantrism, along with ideological myths of model minority and the American dream, combine with the reality of an individual navigating their self-identity, which results in an extraordinary reality that may seem implausible to the reader but is true of the Indian diaspora nonetheless (Ratti, 2023). As a magical realist narrative, *Gold Diggers* does not question the existence of the bizarre events happening in an ordinary setting and instead, accepts the supernatural as part of the natural to explore reality further.

American dream is one of the important ideological myths that Sathian explores in the novel. Presenting a narrative beyond the model minority myth, the author depicts characters who make various independent choices rather than remaining within the stereotypically successful careers, thus highlighting the misconception about the Asian-American minority being overachievers and excessively motivated, mindlessly chasing the mythical American dream

regardless of their personal choices and inclinations. In *Unraveling the 'Model Minority' Stereotype*, Mia Tuan explains:

According to the stereotype, Asian Americans are model minorities because they are all getting ahead in this society without complaining about mistreatment or expecting governmental assistance. As with any stereotype, however, one size does not fit all. At Academic, for instance, not all Asians are “whiz kids” who succeed in school or want to live up to the glowing images portrayed in *Newsweek* and *Time* magazine (Tuan, 1998, pp.198–201).

Sathian breaks this stereotype and represents a community that has people of varied interests and talents as well as individuality. Neil grows up in Hammond Creek, a suburb in Atlanta, among a community of Indian-American families who are doubtlessly driven by ambition, ‘the substance to settle the nerves of immigrant parents’, to achieve the American dream that they were ‘duty-bound to live out’ (Sathian, 2021, p.17, p.45). However, not all children in the community grow up to achieve their parent’s idea of success. Neil’s older sister Prachi is a representative ideal child for immigrant parents as she makes her way to the elite Duke University, participates in Miss Teen pageants held for the South Asian community and later gets married, fulfilling the goals that she was taught one should achieve in order to become successful. In contrast, Neil struggles to maintain good grades and goes on to study history in grad school instead of working in Silicon Valley as his immigrant parents had hoped. Meanwhile, Anita Dayal, the girl next door that Neil admires, strives to be perfect too, maintaining good grades, attending an elite private school, aiming to get accepted into Harvard, winning Miss Teen pageants and performing community service. However, after successfully being accepted into the elite university of Stanford, she eventually drops out and changes her

career path to become a wedding event planner. Furthermore, Shruti Patel is a diligent girl who is highly motivated to be an ideal student but is unable to cope with the pressure and commits suicide at a young age.

The principal use of magical realism in *Gold Diggers* can be noted in the use of gold, which appears in the novel as an allegory for ambition. Anjali Dayal has the knowledge of alchemy and concocts a magical elixir out of gold that suffuses one with ambition and sharpens intelligence. This miraculous 'lemonade' is a boost that Anita, her daughter, consumes to excel in school and extracurriculars persistently. Therefore, to become the ideal version of an immigrant chasing the American dream, she needs such a magical intervention to realise an imagined reality. However, the gold used for this potion must be out of jewellery stolen from other ambitious people so that it would contain the intent of success behind it. When Neil steals Shruti's gold to make the potion for himself and essentially steal her ambition, Shruti is deprived of any motivation to continue her journey towards the American dream. In this way, while this magical reality appears to be beyond rational understanding, it has its own logic where stealing tangible gold becomes equivalent to stealing intangible ambition, invoking the traditional myth of gold representing success.

Magic in the novel is brought into the ambit of rational reality through alchemy and instead of disregarding it as nonsense, Neil truly believes in the existence of the magical golden elixir that allows one to transcend ordinary capabilities to achieve the extraordinary American dream. Neil does not refute the elixir's existence, nor does he doubt its ability. Incredulous as it sounds to him, he accepts this extraordinary phenomenon as a part of his ordinary reality.

Remarkably, Sathian invokes the ancient Indian idea of *Tantrism* as a process of excelling in the contemporary race towards the American dream. The brewing of the magical

lemonade is performed through an ancient Hindu process of alchemy. Sathian showcases the use of a *tantric* procedure which combines scientific mixing of chemicals along with the use of magical and mystical religious elements of Hinduism. In *Tantric Dimensions of Alchemy*, Patricia Sauthoff remarks, ‘Rituals related to medicine hold an ambiguous position in modern ayurveda and *rasaśāstra* (ancient Sanskrit literature on alchemy and medicine). On the one hand, Indian-published English-language textbooks and translations acknowledge the role of mythology and mantra within the traditional canon, while on the other, they minimize these elements by emphasizing and justifying such connections as things of the past’ (Sauthoff, 2023). Sathian portrays how this alchemic practice of the past, imbued with the principles of mythology and mantra, continues to play a vital role in the real contemporary lives of Indians in achieving their modern ideals of success. Anjali had seen her mother, Lakshmi Joshi, concoct the drink for her brother Vivek when he was preparing to get into the reputable Indian Institutes of Technology, a way for Indians to move towards the American dream. Anjali learnt the recipe by discreetly observing her mother who was unwilling to teach it to her and she soon understood that her mother was not preparing any ordinary drink but a special, mystical, magical one that required preparing a potion containing gold, singing a prayer along with passing *mala* beads (beads of a prayer garland) between her fingers, pressing figurines of gods from the altar against her breasts while the figure of the goddess of prosperity and education looked over the sacred process (Sathian, 2021, pp.5-6). This creation of the alchemic potion is recognisably a continuation of the ancient *tantric* traditions that are still present in various forms. Sanskrit works that comprise the *rasaśāstra* make a clear connection between tantric rituals and alchemy and highlight how women played a central role in this process of concocting sacred medicinal

recipes (Sauthoff, 2023). Lakshmi, Anjali and, eventually, Anita become the carriers of this traditional Indian ritual of magic across their changing mundane reality.¹

Tantrism emerged in the first millennium CE, a period that saw a remarkable transition from Vedic tradition to the classical traditions of Hinduism. In *Tantra and the Tantric Traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism*, David Gray states that, ‘Tantrism developed from Vedic ritual traditions as well as from the yogic and meditative traditions that developed both within ancient Hinduism as well as in rival Buddhist and Jain traditions. Hinduism as currently practiced is a product of the intermixture of tantric and devotional approaches to practice that developed during the first millennium CE’ (Gray, 2016). Gray goes on to explain that the *tantric* traditions have come to be associated with ‘black magic’ in India over the past few centuries and that ‘the term *tantra* is now best known in South Asia in the compound *tantramantra*, which is the equivalent in modern languages such as Hindi to “abracadabra” or “hocus-pocus” in English, terms that originated in Western magical practices that now designate “numbo-jumbo, nonsense, gibberish” (Gray, 2016). This ancient religious practice is present in *Gold Diggers* in a modern setting where it enables Vivek’s, and later Anita’s, education in the field of technology and sciences, thereby depicting the role of magic as an extraordinary means to attaining an ordinary and desired reality.

It must be noted here that historically, mercury has been the fundamental metallic element in *tantric* alchemy rather than gold, raising a question on Sathian’s decision to depict gold as the element of magic for success rather than replicating what is mentioned in the Vedic *shastras*. Sauthoff discusses the perceptible textual references to the medicinal uses of mercury

¹ It may be interesting to note that the one time a man takes charge of the brewing process, when Neil steals gold from Shruti Patel and secretly makes the potion for himself, it results in a tragic death by suicide and the potion becomes useless.

dating as far back as the seventh century CE (Sauthoff, 2023). These ancient texts describe the process of making such cures where, ‘mantras played an important role in the production of mercurial medicines in that they were considered a key element to the process of purifying mercury’ (Sauthoff, 2023). *Gold Diggers* portrays a similar use of mantras in making a tonic out of gold as Anjali, working together with Lyall Pratt, a professor at Emory University well-versed in Indian alchemic practices, recreates the recipe of the golden lemonade. However, to pursue a larger ambition, that is, creating the elixir of life, Anjali and Lyall resort to using mercury as dictated in the ancient texts. Rather than limiting themselves to ‘petty, small time’ theft of other’s ambition through gold, they were striving to ‘steal *time* itself,’ explained Anjali (Sathian, 2021, p.314). For this, they followed the *tantric* tradition of using mercury which, as one may expect, resulted in them suffering severe health problems due to mercury poisoning. The pursuit of magic thus leads them to real and logically predictable problems. While Anjali initially believed that she had found ‘some methods the *rasasiddhis*— the Hindu alchemists— never knew in order to make it safe,’ they proved to be incorrect (Sathian, 2021, p.314). When their condition got worse, Lyall claimed that they could only be cured by the ‘holiest gold’, gold that is ‘untouched by human madness and cravings’ and is ‘pure enough to extend one’s time’ that could be found in the rivers. This too proves to be futile as ‘rivers are just rivers’ and they do not find such gold there (Sathian, 2021, pp.316-317). This showcases that while magic may be true, it has its limits and goes hand in hand with reality instead of overpowering it.

Gold emerges as an element with restorative powers in the novel. Its use for making the lemonade, instead of using mercury, further allows the author to draw a larger metaphor of ambition and desire for a life of luxury. Gold, considered a symbol of luck and prosperity in Indian culture since ancient times, is mentioned in several folklore and myths of the region. The

Panchatantra and *Jataka* tales, for example, depict gold as a symbol of fortune in stories conveying moral lessons of compassion, charity and gratitude, warning against greed and malice (Brown, 1919, p.17). At the same time, moreover, its use allows Sathian to incorporate the legends about the American Gold Rush of 1848. Bruce Rosenberg, studying more than a hundred narratives about the quest for gold and silver of the period, identifies certain patterns common to these narratives, such as the lost-mine stories and the figure of the lone prospector (Rosenberg, 1981, p.295). Sathian's Bombayan, Issac Snider, emerges as this lone figure who immigrated to America during the rush and lived discreetly while searching for gold. The description of Snider aligns with Rosenberg's description of the lone prospector:

When these legend-motifs are considered together, a portrait of the real identity of the lone prospector begins to come into focus. He is not quite human, as his uncanny ability to evade pursuers and to live in very rough country with [Native American] Indians and wild animals shows. Often he can go where younger and ostensibly stronger men cannot and no one can find his mine. If he is not quite of this world, then of whose is he?

(Rosenberg, 1981, p.299)

Here, Neil's addiction to success through the gold lemonade draws a parallel between the mysterious Snider who chased a bizarre reality of the gold rush just as Neil was chasing the American dream. Both Snider and Neil overcome hardships and deal with the question of identity as they move toward a mystical reality. This parallel between two Indian immigrants living centuries apart in America and being affected by gold reveals the historical significance of the element and its *longue durée* association with ambition. Additionally, the golden lemonade requiring stolen gold imbued with someone else's aspirations echoes the theft of large amounts of gold that the *conquistadores* in Early America plundered from the native communities

(Merchant, 1954, p.171). The term ‘gold digger’, in this way, emerges with multiple meanings in the novel.

Further, in examining mythical elements in the novel, one may argue that the author portrays a Western influence in her presentation of witchcraft. Neil remarks, ‘Me and the witches three,’ referring to Lakshmi, Anjali and Anita when they together brew a pot of the golden potion, recalling the image of the three Fates (Greek Moirai and Roman Parcae) as well as the three witches in *Macbeth* (Sathian, 2021, p.306). Nevertheless, while their act of making the magical lemonade seems similar to Western myths and notions of witchcraft, Sathian ensures to link the magic to ancient Indian traditions through the *tantric* process used by these witches. Moreover, the title pages for both Part One and Two of the novel quote Vedic texts like the sixth mantra from *Patala 3*, Section 10 of the *Grihya-sutra of Hiranyakesin* and Hindu scriptures like *Manu-smriti*. These quotes depict the role of gold as an auspicious metal since ancient traditions and allow the author to connect the events happening to the Indian diaspora in America to their root culture, thereby embracing the philosophy of Indianness in magical realism as seen in ancient Indian literature, throughout the novel.

Another religious myth that features in the novel is the mythical River Saraswati, mentioned in the Vedas and said to have flourished during the Indus Valley civilisation. The mythical river is part of the Hindu idea of *Triveni Sangam*, a point of confluence of three rivers where one may wash away their sins and attain *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). The mythical Saraswati and the real Ganga and Yamuna are the three sacred rivers often mentioned together in Hindu mythology. In *Gold Diggers*, Anjali tells Neil about the belief that Saraswati contained pure gold untouched by human desire and could grant immortality and, as Lyall had been told by some *swamis* (Hindu ascetics), revive the life of his dead wife from her ashes

(Sathian, 2021, p.309). Lyall's claim that the pure gold from Californian rivers could cure him from the mercury poisoning results in a direct comparison of the sacred Hindu river to the American river, one mythical and one actual, one magical and one real.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to mention that *Gold Diggers* does not present only the traditional Indian understandings of an extraordinary reality as some elements of magical realism have also been inspired by the previously existing European, African-American and Latin American literary works of the genre. For instance, the matter-of-fact description of the ghost of Shruti Patel which manifests and hovers around Neil is similar to the appearance of ghosts in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and *Beloved* (1987). Neil is able to see, hear and even feel Shruti's presence for years after her death. He does not perceive the ghost as a fragment of his imagination and instead accepts it as unquestionable reality. Becoming a part of Neil's subjective experience, the ghost of Shruti is ever present around him, intruding on his conversations with others and commenting on his actions as if her supernatural presence were a natural phenomenon. Her extraordinary existence becomes a part of the ordinary reality through her regular remarks on his behaviour, reactions and his academic performance. This supernatural presence is also similar to the ghosts in *Midnight's Children* who were visible to the person haunted by a guilt, such as Mary Pereira being haunted by the ghost of Joseph D'Costa. The fear of the ghost of Shruti is, thus, not invoked by her paranormal presence (a magical phenomenon) but by the guilt that manifests her and the burden of carrying on the ambition that she could not (a rationally justifiable reality).

The Bombayan, furthermore, emerges as a ghostly presence, as Neil remains preoccupied with the thought of an Indian immigrant looking to strike gold in America centuries ago. Playing into the Indian literary practice of intertextuality, this tale of Issac Snider is narrated in *Gold*

Diggers in a story-within-a-story fashion. Finding out about the Bombayyan gold digger from Ramesh Uncle as a boy, Neil becomes fascinated with the idea of having a forebear in America who could put a rest to his identity conflict of being both Indian and American. He goes on to trace the forgotten historical figure to be Issac Snider and through him, describes history in a narrative where the real and the magical come together. Projecting his own experience with a magical reality, he imagines Snider using gold for magical purposes as he himself had used the lemonade:

I picture it like this: The gold digger [...] says a very rapid, old prayer. He places two golden nuggets in his mouth and swallows, thinking wildly that in these nuggets lie the very blessing and promise of America. He prays that this blessing be given to him.(Sathian, 2021, p.194)

Neil further imagines Snider attempting to escape from the captivity of the whites but being shot on the bank of river Yuba where he is reminded of the holy Ganges. Later in the novel, when Neil escapes with the stolen jewellery from the Expo, a cyclical notion of time appears where both Neil and Snider are outlaws for stealing gold to attain the ‘blessing and promise of America’.

These instances portray how Sathian took inspiration from previous magical realist literature, such as from Latin America, and immersed the narrative into a twenty-first-century Indian diasporic experience so that the novel emerges with a distinct Indianness even in an American setting. The foundation of the narrative lies in the ancient history as well as the postcolonial Indian experience and these are linked through multiple stories being unveiled simultaneously in a non-linear narrative. Thus, instances from different generations of the Indian diaspora merge into each other through characters like Snider, Anjali and Neil. For example,

Issac Snider and Anjali Dayal may both be called the Bombayan as they both come to America from Bombay with an ambition for success that they would achieve through stolen gold. On the one hand, the narrative begins in Bombay where the magical potion is first mentioned as an elixir for success and is desired by Anjali, while on the other hand, the ending depicts the brew being no longer desired and cast off into the Californian river.

Colonial historiography has often ignored the voice of the colonised, and magical realist narratives like *Gold Diggers* are an instance of bringing forward the suppressed postcolonial experience. *Gold Diggers* uses magic for discussing the truth as its narrative blends the extraordinary and the ordinary to make a 'lemonade' of the magical reality. Accepting this bizarre experience as a part of the reality, Neil describes the ghosts of the Bombayan, Shruti, Lyall and Vivek collecting the discarded gold in the river:

I didn't and don't have a name for what happened that night. In the months that followed, all I got from Lakshmi Joshi and her non-hermeneutical approach to history was that there are some mysteries a person needs to accept, some logics to which we are all subject, whether or not we believe we opted into them (Sathian, 2021, p.324).

The magical is, thus, not discarded as nonsense and, instead, is presented as the truth irrespective of whether one believes in it or not, as conventionally seen in Indian folklore and mythologies. Magical realism stemming from traditional Indian narrative style, in this way, has been used in *Gold Diggers* as a narrative mode of describing a postcolonial magical reality that combines the irrational and the rational, the mythical and the real, the forgotten past and the lived present, and the extraordinary and the ordinary. The novel uses both religious and ideological myths and blends them into the reality of the twenty-first-century Indian diasporic experience in America,

presenting a continuation of the philosophy of Indianness in the form of persisting ancient Indian traditions of magic being an indisputable reality.

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