

**Urban Fantasies and Marginal Realities: The Politics of Magical Realism in
Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha***

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Abstract:

Magical realism, as a literary mode, merges the mundane and the marvelous to reveal the hidden truths of social and political life. Originating in Latin American fiction, it has found new representation in Indian English literature as a means of articulating the contradictions of postcolonial modernity. Within this tradition, Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha* (2006) emerges as a compelling narrative that juxtaposes urban destitution with imaginative transcendence. The novel centers on Chamdi, an orphaned child navigating the brutal realities of Bombay's streets, whose vision of "Kahunsha", a city without sadness, serves as both an escapist fantasy and a mode of political resistance.

This paper explores how Irani employs magical realism as a narrative strategy to politicize imagination and unveil the violence underlying urban development and communal conflict. By blending the real and the fantastic, Irani constructs a postcolonial cityscape where hope and despair coexist, exposing the fractures of neoliberal urbanism. The study adopts a qualitative textual methodology, employing close reading and postcolonial theoretical frameworks to analyze how Irani's magical realist aesthetics critique systemic marginalization and offer a subversive re-enchantment of the city.

The findings suggest that magical realism in *The Song of Kahunsha* functions not as a tool of escapism but as an ethical response to urban precarity, transforming fantasy into a language of resistance and resilience. Irani's narrative thus reconfigures the politics of magical realism within the Indian English context, revealing its potential to make visible the invisible lives that constitute the moral underside of modernity.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Urban Marginality, Resistance, Anosh Irani, Postcolonial City, Narrative Politics, Indian English Fiction

Introduction

Magical realism, as a literary mode, originated in Latin American fiction with writers such as Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende, who employed the blending of the magical and the mundane to expose political oppression and social contradictions. Over time, this aesthetic migrated beyond its Latin American roots and found fertile ground in postcolonial literatures, particularly in India, where authors like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni adapted the mode to articulate hybrid realities shaped by colonial legacies, spiritual syncretism, and social fragmentation. In Indian English fiction, magical realism became a powerful means of reconciling myth with modernity, mythos with metropolis, revealing how the extraordinary grows from the soil of ordinary suffering.

In recent decades, magical realism has undergone a significant shift from its earlier association with mythic or rural spaces toward urban-centered narratives that foreground the contradictions of neoliberal development. Cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Kolkata emerge not merely as physical spaces but as symbolic terrains where fantasy and despair coexist. This urban turn in magical realism reflects a growing interest in how imagination responds to alienation, violence, and poverty in postcolonial megacities. It is within this evolving literary context that Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha* (2006) occupies a crucial position. Set in the underbelly of Bombay, the novel transforms the city into a surreal landscape where a child's dreams of purity clash with the brutal realities of survival.

Problem Statement

While magical realism in Indian fiction has been extensively studied in the works of Rushdie and Roy, critical attention has largely focused on its mythopoetic or historical functions rather than its urban and political dimensions. There remains a relative neglect of how magical realism operates within narratives centered on contemporary Indian cities, particularly those representing the experiences of marginalized and impoverished populations. *The Song of Kahunsha* presents a unique case where magical realism is not a device for mythmaking or national allegory but a lens through which the moral contradictions of urban modernity are revealed. This study seeks to address the gap in understanding how magical realism functions as a political language within such urban narratives.

Research Gap

Despite Anosh Irani's growing recognition as a chronicler of Mumbai's underclass, there is a noticeable absence of scholarship that examines his use of magical realism as an instrument of resistance. Most readings of *The Song of Kahunsha* emphasize its sociological depiction of street life or its representation of innocence lost, but they seldom interrogate the political implications of its fantastical imagery. This research bridges that gap by positioning Irani's narrative within the broader tradition of postcolonial magical realism, analyzing how the imagined "City of No Sadness" becomes a symbolic counter-narrative to the violence, exploitation, and despair of urban life.

Study Significance

This study underscores how imagination, far from being an escapist act, operates as a survival mechanism for marginalized voices within oppressive social structures. By examining how Irani's protagonist, Chamdi, constructs fantasy as a refuge against deprivation, the paper reveals how magical realism mediates between trauma and transcendence. It further contributes to postcolonial urban studies and subaltern narratology by demonstrating how the genre reclaims narrative agency for those rendered invisible by systemic inequality. In doing so, it highlights the ethical and political potential of magical realism to re-enchant the modern city, transforming sites of exclusion into spaces of empathy and resistance.

Research Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to analyze the function of magical realism as a political discourse in Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha*.

The specific objectives are:

- To explore how magical realism articulates the tension between urban poverty and imagination.
- To interpret how fantasy redefines trauma, poverty, and innocence in the urban landscape.
- To reveal how Irani's narrative constructs hope and moral vision amid degradation and despair.

Research Questions

1. How does magical realism serve as resistance in Irani's narrative?
2. What is the political and emotional role of fantasy for the marginalized?
3. How does Irani transform urban space into a site of both horror and hope?

Literature Review

Magical realism first emerged as a critical framework in the early twentieth century through Franz Roh's concept of *magischer Realismus*, later redefined by Alejo Carpentier as *lo real maravilloso* to capture the marvellous dimensions of Latin American reality. The form achieved global recognition through the works of Gabriel García Márquez, whose seamless blending of myth, politics, and the everyday influenced writers across continents. In South Asian literature, authors such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Shashi Tharoor have adapted this mode to articulate the tensions of postcolonial identity, hybridity, and historical fragmentation.

Recent scholarship has expanded the lens of magical realism to include urban narratives that reveal the complexities of modern Indian life, particularly the voices emerging from the margins. Theoretical frameworks by scholars such as Wendy Faris, Lois Parkinson Zamora, and Amaryll Chanady have provided critical insight into the structural and thematic dimensions of magical realism, while Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" and Henri Lefebvre's idea of the "production of space" illuminate its postcolonial urban implications. Additionally, subaltern and trauma theories advanced by Gayatri Spivak and Cathy Caruth

help situate magical realism as a vehicle for articulating silenced experiences and social wounds.

While Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has long been read as a national allegory, Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha* offers a micro-urban counterpart, focusing on orphaned and marginalized lives within the cityscape. Irani's narrative differs from grand national mythmaking by embedding the magical within the ordinary struggles of urban survival. Despite this, there remains a notable absence of comprehensive critical engagement connecting magical realism with the politics of spatial and social marginality in Irani's work, an analytical gap this study seeks to address.

A reader-based review published on *Asian American Literature Fans* (2007) offers an early interpretive response to Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha*, emphasizing the novel's delicate balance between horror and innocence. The reviewer observes that Irani narrates the story through the limited third-person perspective of Chamdi, a ten-year-old orphan whose idealized vision of Bombay, "Kahunsha," or the "City of No Sadness", stands in poignant contrast to the grim realities of urban poverty and communal violence.

In her chapter "City Imaginaries From the Margins," Rita Nnodim critically examines Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha* within the context of Bombay's urban landscape. Nnodim explores how Irani's narrative transforms the city's emotional geography of exclusion into one of belonging, intertwining beauty and justice through the imaginative vision of Kahunsha. This analysis contributes to global literary urban studies by engaging with the emotional and affective dimensions of urban marginalization, highlighting how literature can reimagine urban life from the perspectives of its most vulnerable inhabitants

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretative research design, grounded in close textual analysis. The focus is on examining how *The Song of Kahunsha* (2006) by Anosh Irani constructs a narrative space where magical realism becomes a mode of political and emotional resistance.

The primary text for this study is Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha*, while secondary sources include critical writings on magical realism, postcolonial theory, and urban marginality. These scholarly works provide the conceptual and analytical framework necessary to contextualize Irani's narrative within broader literary and socio-political traditions. The analysis draws upon three key theoretical lenses: postcolonial urbanism, which helps unpack the spatial politics of the city; magical realism theory, which interprets the blending of the real and the fantastic as a subversive narrative strategy; and trauma studies, which illuminate how marginalized subjectivities negotiate suffering and resilience through imagination. Together, these approaches enable a nuanced reading of Irani's

portrayal of the urban poor, situating fantasy not as escapism but as an act of survival and resistance.

Discussion

Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha* situates magical realism within the fractured geography of Bombay, transforming the city into what Homi Bhabha calls a "third space", a hybrid terrain where despair and dream coexist. Magical realism in Irani's narrative functions as a political discourse of resistance, not an escapist retreat from material suffering. Through the child protagonist Chamdi's imaginative reconstructions of the city, Irani exposes the moral dissonance of postcolonial urban modernity, where the promise of progress is shadowed by displacement and violence. The magical thus becomes an ethical language, a way to articulate what cannot be spoken within the limits of realism.

He sees people celebrating Holi. Everyone is out in the streets dancing to the beat of dhols, throwing coloured powder in the air, jumping into those colours and becoming them for a day or week. The people have finally understood the true nature of Holi, if their faces are dipped in green, then for the next few days Bombay is lush, and men, women, and children pass through their troubles with ease. If their chests are smeared in red, it means they will fall in love and get married. Every colour known to man comes to the people of Bombay as a friend, and the people become them all. But such a place must be known by another name, he reasons. So he invents one, and says it out loud: "Kahunsha." To him this means "the city of no sadness." Someday all sadness will die, he believes, and Bombay will be reborn as Kahunsha. By the time he wakes up, he feels refreshed. (Irani 12)

Drawing on Wendy Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora's theoretical framework, Irani's text fulfills the essential features of magical realism: the coexistence of the real and the marvellous, and the narrative's refusal to privilege one over the other. Yet, the novel departs from the Latin American tradition by relocating the "marvellous real" (Carpentier) into the urban squalor of Bombay's underclass. The supernatural elements do not emerge from mythic heritage but from psychic trauma, echoing Cathy Caruth's view of trauma as an experience that "returns belatedly" through imaginative displacement. In this sense, Chamdi's visions of Kahunsha, an imagined city of purity and kindness, are not cultural remnants but psychic responses to abandonment and violence.

He opens the door, steps into the night, and walks straight towards the row of bougainvilleas. In the dark, he cannot see colours. But he uses his mind to light the petals up, and after a moment he begins to see shades of pink and red. He likes this, how the colours stand apart from the darkness". (Irani 30) Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "production of space" provides another lens for interpreting Irani's urban landscape. The city, in Lefebvre's terms, is not a neutral backdrop but a socially produced space that reflects hierarchies of power and exclusion. In *The Song of Kahunsha*, Bombay is simultaneously dystopian and redemptive, a space of exploitation yet also of affective possibility. Irani reclaims this urban space through what Bhabha terms the "unhomely," where the boundary between the private

and the political dissolves. The everyday struggles of street children become inscriptions of larger structural violence, thereby politicizing their marginal existence.

That's of no use at all, you fool! When you go to the taxi to beg, they will not ask you, 'excuse me, can you spell your name, please'? "What I do?" "You must act like you are suffering." "Hero, this is Bombay. No one cares about the truth. The people want emotion. Tears! Can you cry real tears?"(Irani 103)

Contrasted with the mythic and national allegories of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Irani's narrative embraces what may be called a micro-urban allegory. Instead of mythologizing the nation, he mythologizes survival itself. His use of magical realism collapses the distinction between fantasy and protest, the marvellous becomes a weapon of empathy. Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" resonates here: Chamdi and other marginalized characters "speak" through imaginative acts that defy the silencing effects of urban poverty.

Ultimately, Irani redefines the politics of magical realism for postcolonial India. The novel represents a shift from mythic to urban magic, from inherited wonder to invented wonder born of necessity. Fantasy here is not cultural ornamentation but emotional insurgency, a means through which the subaltern self reclaims agency within a violent social order. The unexpected finding that emerges from this reading is that Irani's magical elements are trauma-induced, embodying what Caruth describes as the "language of the wound." Through this, Irani humanizes the invisible lives of the city's dispossessed, making the imagination itself a radical act of survival.

But he has nothing to hold on to. When he left the orphanage, he had Kahunsha. He saw it so clearly, like it was real, as though it did truly exist. Now even his bougainvilleas are of no use. He hears Guddi take a deep breath. He still does not look her way because if she is crying, he will not be able to do much. (Irani 195)

Limitations

This study acknowledges several methodological and contextual limitations that frame its scope. As a single-text analysis, the research focuses exclusively on Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha*, which constrains the generalizability of its findings. While the qualitative, interpretative approach allows for nuanced reading and theoretical depth, it inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity, as literary interpretation is shaped by the researcher's critical positioning and choice of theoretical lens.

Another limitation arises from the scarcity of secondary scholarship on Irani's fiction, particularly in relation to postcolonial urbanism and magical realism. Compared to more extensively studied authors such as Rushdie or Roy, Irani's work occupies a relatively marginal space within Indian English literary criticism. This gap restricts opportunities for intertextual and comparative analysis. Furthermore, the field of urban studies in Indian

English fiction remains underexplored, especially in relation to representations of slum life, child subjectivity, and the intersection of trauma and imagination. Despite these constraints, the present study contributes to this emerging discourse by highlighting the critical potential of magical realism as a mode of resistance within the urban margins.

Conclusion

The analysis of Anosh Irani's *The Song of Kahunsha* reveals how magical realism operates as a profound narrative strategy for articulating the politics of urban marginality. Irani transforms the streets of Bombay into a symbolic terrain where violence, deprivation, and hope intersect, and where imagination becomes an act of resistance. Magical realism, in this context, is not merely a stylistic device but a means of reclaiming moral and emotional agency for the dispossessed. By filtering the brutal realities of urban life through the consciousness of a child, Irani exposes the contradictions of postcolonial modernity, its promises of progress shadowed by systemic exclusion.

This study contributes both practically and theoretically to the field of literary and cultural studies. Practically, it offers a framework for reading marginal urban narratives through the lens of magical realism, emphasizing how the imaginative can intervene in discourses of poverty, trauma, and invisibility. Theoretically, it extends the boundaries of magical realism beyond its Latin American and mythic origins to encompass the postcolonial city as a space of contestation and resilience. Moreover, by foregrounding the subaltern imagination as a site of political and affective agency, Irani's work redefines the relationship between realism, fantasy, and ethics in contemporary Indian English fiction.

Future Work

Future research may build upon this study by pursuing comparative analyses with other writers who interrogate similar urban and social dynamics, such as Rohinton Mistry, whose *A Fine Balance* explores structural poverty; Arundhati Subramaniam, who reimagines spiritual yearning within modern cityscapes; and Aravind Adiga, whose *The White Tiger* exposes neoliberal violence within the same urban milieu. Such comparative readings could reveal a broader literary pattern of how Indian fiction negotiates class, morality, and imagination within the postcolonial metropolis.

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