
Fantasy as Cultural Expression: *Magical Realms in the Fiction of Samit Basu and Manjiri Prabhu*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the function of fantasy as a vehicle for cultural expression and identity negotiation in the English-language fiction of Indian writers Samit Basu and Manjiri Prabhu. Although both authors have gained significant readership, Basu as a foundational figure in Indian English fantasy following *The Simoqin Prophecies* (2004), and Prabhu as the first Indian woman mystery novelist labeled “Desi Agatha Christie,” their works remain critically underexamined in postcolonial literary studies. Employing Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity and insights from fantasy studies, this comparative textual analysis investigates the narrative strategies through which Basu and Prabhu construct magical realms that question fixed identities. The study reveals two distinct approaches: Basu’s irreverent postmodern hybridity produces an inclusive, globalized fantasy space that deconstructs epic conventions, while Prabhu’s destination thrillers embed supernatural elements within specific geographies, re-enchanting Indian heritage through a framework of mystery and romance. Drawing on E. Dawson Varughese’s notion of “Bharati fantasy” as contemporary Indian English mythology-inspired fiction that has moved beyond the traditional postcolonial paradigm, this paper argues that the magical worlds of Basu and Prabhu function not as escapist constructs but as spaces where a globalized Indian identity is produced, negotiated, and expressed. The study concludes that their works exemplify a new direction in Indian English speculative fiction in which inherited narratives are reshaped through hybrid forms, situating the fantastic not as departure from reality but as a site of cultural meaning-making relevant to post-millennial India.

Keywords: *Indian English fiction; fantasy literature; cultural hybridity; Samit Basu; Manjiri Prabhu; postcolonial studies; Bharati fantasy; magical realism*

INTRODUCTION

The critical reception of Indian English literature has for decades been dominated by postcolonial realism, a canon in which writers from Salman Rushdie to Arundhati Roy have wielded magical realism as a tool to interrogate history, nation, and diaspora. Yet the last two decades have witnessed a significant transformation in the literary landscape: a vibrant body of genre fiction has emerged that unabashedly embraces the conventions of fantasy, science fiction, mystery-thriller, and superhero narratives. This paper examines the works of Samit Basu and Manjiri Prabhu, two Indian English authors who employ fantastic world-building not as a retreat from reality but as a sophisticated language for articulating the complexities of contemporary Indian identity.

Samit Basu, whose debut novel *The Simoqin Prophecies* (2004) has been described as “India’s first ever SFF (science fiction/fantasy) genre novel in English” (Clarkesworld) and “marked the beginning of Indian English fantasy writing,” creates the GameWorld—a secondary world that blends Hindu mythology with Western fantasy tropes, postmodern humor, and intertextual references. The novel “was a national bestseller for six months in India when it released in 2003 and marked the beginning of Indian fantasy writing in English” (Penguin Random House India). Manjiri Prabhu, labeled the “Desi Agatha Christie” and acknowledged as the first woman mystery novelist in India, writes destination thrillers such as *Voice of the Runes* (2018) and *The Legend of the Snow Queen* (2023), works that blur the boundaries between mystery and fantasy, where psychic visions, rune divination, and legendary figures intrude upon the rational, modern world. Prabhu firmly believes that “mystery is an all-encompassing genre which absorbs other genres,” and her works exemplify this capacious approach (Bangalore Mirror). As one reviewer notes, *The Legend of the Snow Queen* “takes readers into a world of mystique and wonder, where the boundaries between reality and fantasy blur” (Telegraph India).

Despite their contributions, Basu and Prabhu have received insufficient scholarly attention, often treated as popular rather than literary writers. This paper addresses that gap by asking the following research question: How do the magical realms constructed by Samit Basu and Manjiri Prabhu function as sites of cultural expression and identity negotiation in post-millennial India? The study argues that their works exemplify a new direction in Indian English speculative fiction, one in which inherited narratives are reshaped through hybrid forms, situating the fantastic not as departure from reality but as a space where a globalized Indian identity is produced, negotiated, and expressed. This thesis is developed through a

comparative textual analysis employing Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, E. Dawson Varughese's concept of "Bharati fantasy," and critical frameworks from fantasy studies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarship on Indian English speculative fiction has expanded considerably in the past decade, yet significant gaps remain in the critical treatment of genre writers such as Samit Basu and Manjiri Prabhu. This review examines three key areas of existing research: the development of postcolonial approaches to fantasy and magical realism, the emergence of "Bharati fantasy" as a critical category, and the critical conversation surrounding Basu and Prabhu specifically.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND THE FANTASTIC

Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity has proven foundational for understanding the interstitial spaces in which postcolonial identities are negotiated. Bhabha proposes the "third space" of cultural encounter, "in which the colonizer and the colonized negotiate, producing hybridity in culture" (Khadka 17-18). This interstitial space subverts essentialist identities and binary oppositions, enabling new forms of cultural production. As Khadka argues, the third space produces "hybridity in culture" that "subverts colonial domination by deconstructing essentialist identity and binary opposition of the colonizer and colonized or the East and the West" (17-18). This framework is particularly useful for analyzing Indian English fantasy, a genre that by its very nature occupies a third space between multiple cultural traditions.

Building on Bhabha, critics have explored how postcolonial writers employ fantasy and magical realism to interrogate colonial histories and national identities. Tabish Khair, in his chapter on "The Politics and Art of Indian English Fantasy Fiction," notes a persistent hierarchical divide: while "acclaimed 'literary' novels share a mix of the fantastic and the 'real' that is also the province of usually much less acclaimed fantasy fiction" (Khair 38-39), the latter is often devalued as popular genre fiction. Khair traces this divide to the "old eighteenth and nineteenth-century tension between 'fancy' and 'imagination,' as well as 'low' and 'high' cultures," which becomes further complicated in non-European contexts by "anglocentric discursive hegemony and the colonial gaze" (15-20). This observation is crucial for understanding the marginalization of Indian English fantasy within traditional postcolonial criticism.

BHARATI FANTASY AND THE POST-POSTCOLONIAL TURN

A major contribution to the study of Indian English genre fiction is E. Dawson Varughese's *Genre Fiction of New India: Post-Millennial Receptions of 'Weird' Narratives* (2016). In this work, Varughese introduces the term "Bharati fantasy" to describe "fiction in English, written within, and published from India since 2000 in the genre of mythology-inspired fiction" (15). Crucially, Varughese argues that Bharati fantasy "highlights how English fiction from India has moved away from being identified as the traditional Indian postcolonial text" (22-27). This represents a significant theoretical shift: rather than reading genre fiction through the lens of national allegory or postcolonial resistance, Varughese invites critics to understand these works on their own terms, as expressions of "modern-day sensibilities" that engage with global popular culture alongside local mythologies (Dawson Varughese 43-44). This post-postcolonial perspective is echoed by other scholars who argue that "fantasy is rooted in Indian blood, therefore, fantastic happenings in reality is an accepted version of daily happenings" (Shodhganga 17-22), suggesting that the fantastic is not an imported genre convention but a native mode of storytelling.

CRITICAL RECEPTION OF SAMIT BASU AND MANJIRI PRABHU

Samit Basu's *GameWorld Trilogy* has received some critical attention. Srishti Khare's paper "Rewriting the Mythic: Cultural Hybridity and Speculative Reimagination in Samit Basu's *The GameWorld Trilogy*" (2025) provides a foundational analysis, demonstrating "how Basu reconstructs mythic themes from Indian epics and folklore while blending them with the conventions of fantasy and modern storytelling" and "how Basu uses humor, parody, and intertextuality to reshape inherited narratives for a global readership" (Khare 12-14). The study argues "that *The GameWorld Trilogy* is not only a playful work of fantasy but also an intellectual project that redefines myth and imagination in twenty-first-century Indian English literature" (Khare 16-18). Other scholars have noted how the trilogy represents "contemporary socio-political situations in which selfish people try to manipulate power elements to fulfil their desires" (Shodhganga 34-38). Critical reviews have characterized the trilogy as "post-modern—there are no real heroes" and "post-racist—all the races are morally ambiguous and there are no real villains" (Outlook India 16-20).

Manjiri Prabhu has received less academic attention, though her popular reception is substantial. Her work *Voice of the Runes* (2018) is described as a "rather mystical drama" set at Lund University in Sweden, featuring "Rune Divination" and "a maze of intricate Nordic

signs and symbols” (Times of India 24-26). Similarly, *The Legend of the Snow Queen* (2023) is a “destination thriller” that “defly weaves three distinct threads into one seamless adventure” and “transports readers into a world of mystique and wonder, where the boundaries between reality and fantasy blur” (Sanghi 4-10). Reviewers note Prabhu’s “immersive” writing style, allowing “the reader to fully appreciate all three strands—destination, history and mystery” (Sanghi 12-15). However, neither Basu nor Prabhu has been extensively analyzed within a comparative framework that brings their different approaches to fantasy into dialogue. This paper addresses that gap.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a comparative textual analysis methodology grounded in three theoretical frameworks: Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity, E. Dawson Varughese’s formulation of “Bharati fantasy,” and critical approaches from fantasy studies concerning world-building as a rhetorical act. The selection of primary texts follows from the research question’s focus on magical realms: from Samit Basu, *The Simoqin Prophecies* (2004) was chosen as the foundational text of the *GameWorld Trilogy* and a landmark in Indian English fantasy; from Manjiri Prabhu, *Voice of the Runes* (2018) and *The Legend of the Snow Queen* (2023) were selected as representative works that demonstrate her distinctive combination of mystery, destination narrative, and supernatural elements. These texts were chosen because they represent different subgenres of fantasy—secondary-world epic fantasy versus contemporary mystery with magical elements—allowing comparative analysis of how each author deploys the fantastic.

The analytical procedure consists of three stages. First, a close reading of each primary text identifies the specific strategies through which the author constructs the magical realm: the sources of mythological or supernatural elements, the relationship between the fantastic and the real, and the narrative functions of magical devices. Second, each text is analyzed through Bhabha’s third space framework to determine how its hybrid elements produce new cultural meanings rather than simply reproducing existing traditions. Third, the two authors are compared along key dimensions: the scale and nature of their fantastic worlds (secondary vs. embedded), the treatment of tradition (parodic vs. reverent), and the implied readership (global genre-savvy vs. international mystery audience).

This methodology has limitations. The selection of three texts from two authors cannot capture the full range of either writer’s oeuvre. Basu’s later works, such as *Turbulence* (2011)

and Chosen Spirits (2020), which move into superhero and dystopian modes, are not examined. Similarly, Prabhu's earlier mysteries and her work in film and television lie outside this study's scope. Moreover, the study does not engage with reception data—how Indian and international readers actually interpret these works—focusing instead on textual strategies. These limitations point toward directions for future research.

SAMIT BASU: THE GAMEWORLD AS POSTMODERN CULTURAL COLLAGE

Samit Basu's *The Simoqin Prophecies* opens its narrative not with a conventional invocation of a single mythic tradition but with a deliberate act of cultural accumulation. The novel's world, the GameWorld, is constructed through what one reviewer calls "a motley mix of eastern and western fantasy featuring a huge bestiary of creatures from mythic traditions from all around the world, both ancient and modern" (Wikipedia 30-32). Within this world, vanars from the Hindu epic tradition coexist with Western dragons, rakshases battle manticores, and the narrative casually references everything from Greek mythology to superhero comics. As Penguin's description notes, the novel draws "from a variety of sources ranging from Greek and Indian epics to spy novels, fairy tales to superhero comics" (Penguin Random House India 26-28). This is not syncretism in the service of creating a coherent, singular mythological system; it is a deliberate, exuberant collage.

The critical significance of this narrative strategy lies in its refusal of cultural hierarchy. In Basu's GameWorld, Indian mythic figures are not framed as exotic or other, nor are Western fantasy creatures presented as normative defaults. Instead, all mythological elements coexist on the same narrative plane. As Khare observes, "Basu's trilogy blends Indian mythic archetypes with Western fantasy conventions, showcasing a complex process of cultural hybridity. This coexistence of diverse elements without hierarchy reflects..." (Khare 44-46). The effect is a world where a reader encountering a rakshas is expected to respond with the same familiarity as a reader encountering a dragon. Basu's writing thus transforms "myth into a living, dynamic force that speaks to contemporary realities of identity, colonial history, and cultural change" (Khare 12-14).

This hybridity operates not merely at the level of world-building but also at the level of narrative tone and genre. *The Simoqin Prophecies* is simultaneously an epic quest narrative and a parody of epic quest narratives. As one reviewer notes, the book is "absolutely rammed with gags (the cheaper the better), terrible puns, and affectionate mockery of fantasy tropes" (StoryGraph 31-33). The novel features "scantly clad centaresses, flying carpets, pink

trolls, belly dancers and homicidal rabbits” (Penguin Random House India 39-40). This tone is crucial to Basu’s cultural project. By treating his mythological materials with irreverence and humor, Basu refuses to sanctify them. Indian myth in his hands is not a sacred inheritance to be handled with reverential distance but a living, malleable discourse that can be questioned, deconstructed, and played with.

The implications for cultural identity are significant. Traditional postcolonial narratives often position the writer as a guardian of authentic cultural heritage, tasked with recovering pre-colonial traditions from the distortions of colonial representation. Basu, writing in the post-millennial moment, operates with a different set of assumptions. His *GameWorld* assumes a reader who is globally genre-savvy, familiar with both the *Ramayana* and *The Lord of the Rings*, both Indian astrology and Douglas

Adams. By creating a fantasy space where these traditions are freely mixed without anxiety about authenticity, Basu expresses a confident, globalized Indian identity that is comfortable with its own hybridity. The world he builds is, in Khare’s formulation, one where “myth is redefined as a dynamic discourse reflecting contemporary Indian identity” (Khare 17-18). This is fantasy not as cultural defense but as cultural play.

MANJIRI PRABHU: THE ENCHANTED PRESENT

If Basu’s fantasy is expansive and secondary-world, Manjiri Prabhu’s is embedded and contemporary. Her magical realms do not require a separate ontological plane; they intrude upon the rational, modern world of academic conferences, investigative journalism, and international diplomacy. This intrusion of the fantastic into the mundane is the central narrative mechanism through which her works express cultural meaning.

Voice of the Runes exemplifies this strategy. The novel follows journalist Re Parkar as he returns to Lund University in Sweden for its 350th anniversary celebrations, only to become embroiled in a murder mystery involving the university’s Department of Runes. The professor of runology drops dead during his welcome speech—poisoned, it emerges, through his runes (Asian Age 13-17). What follows is a narrative in which “Runes play an integral role in Prabhu’s telling with Nordic symbols becoming one of the major catalysts in helping move the plot forward” (Asian Age 2022). The novel invokes the concept of “Ragnarok,” the Norse apocalypse, as a narrative framework, yet the mystery remains grounded in contemporary academic intrigue, romantic tension, and psychological drama. The tagline—“When Souls Connect, but Vengeance Speaks” (Times of India 46-47)—suggests a world

where the ancient and the modern are not separate but continuously interpenetrating.

Similarly, The Legend of the Snow Queen blurs “the boundaries of reality and fantasy” (Telegraph India 13-14). Set against “a Christmassy, Bavarian winter- wonderland” (Passionate in Marketing 20-21), the novel “defly weaves three distinct threads into one seamless adventure”: destination, history, and mystery (Sanghi 7-10). Prabhu dips “into local legend, delving deep into the story of the friendship between German Emperor Ludwig II and the Austrian Empress Elisabeth or Sisi, his cousin” (Amazon 43-45). The novel thus constructs a magical realm not through the invention of a secondary world but through the enchantment of existing geographic and historical spaces.

Prabhu’s own comments on her writing process illuminate the cultural function of this embedded fantasy. Speaking about her research methods, she states, “Before writing any book, I engage in detailed research and while I am researching I feel that this book is destined to be born” (Telegraph India 17-19). This language of destiny and destined narratives is telling; it suggests that for Prabhu, the fantastic elements in her work are not artificial impositions on reality but emergent properties of reality itself, available to those who pay attention. Her commitment to “destination thrillers” reflects a belief that places carry their own histories and enchantments. As she explains, “I focus on writing destination thrillers, stressing on Kolkata, I feel the energy in the city is a blend of thrills and erudition. There is so much history and culture in every corner that I feel Kolkata is perfect for a thriller” (Telegraph India 31-34). The city itself becomes a magical realm, its “history and culture” providing the raw material for narrative enchantment.

This approach to fantasy carries particular cultural resonance in the Indian context. As one scholar notes, “fantasy is rooted in Indian blood, therefore, fantastic happenings in reality is an accepted version of daily happenings” (Shodhganga 17-19). The classical Indian literary tradition, from the Ramayana and Mahabharata to the Katha Sarit Sagara, freely mixes the mundane and the marvelous. Prabhu’s work, by embedding the fantastic within contemporary detective fiction, can be read as a recovery of this native narrative mode, filtered through the conventions of the international mystery genre. The ancient narrative style becomes “a key for post - colonial resistance against the cultural imperialism” (Shodhganga 20-22), not through rejection of Western forms but through their appropriation and transformation.

COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS: TWO PATHS TO A SINGLE DESTINATION

The comparison between Basu and Prabhu reveals two distinct strategies for using fantasy as

cultural expression. Basu constructs a secondary world where multiple mythologies coexist without hierarchy, creating a space in which a globalized, hybrid Indian identity can be imagined without anxiety. His irreverence and parody serve to normalize hybridity, making the coexistence of vanars and dragons, Indian epics and Western fantasy tropes, seem not like a desperate attempt at cosmopolitanism but like a natural, confident expression of a culture comfortable with its own complexity.

Prabhu, by contrast, works within the contemporary world, using fantasy to re- enchant specific geographies and histories. Her magic is not a rejection of the rational but a supplement to it, revealing the ancient within the modern, the marvelous within the mundane. Where Basu's fantasy is centrifugal, scattering its hybrid elements across an invented secondary world, Prabhu's is centripetal, drawing the reader into the dense particularity of places—a Swedish university campus, a Bavarian hotel, the streets of Kolkata—each of which carries its own buried histories and latent enchantments.

Yet despite these differences, both authors share a crucial characteristic: they write beyond the postcolonial paradigm. Neither is primarily concerned with representing India to the West, nor with negotiating the trauma of colonial history. Instead, both write as if the postcolonial moment has passed, and what remains is the freedom to use whatever narrative tools—Indian or Western, ancient or modern, epic or detective—serve the story. This is precisely the shift that Varughese identifies as characteristic of Bharati fantasy: “English fiction from India has moved away from being identified as the traditional Indian postcolonial text” (Dawson Varughese 22-23).

The magical realms of Basu and Prabhu, then, are not escapes from reality but expressions of it. They articulate a way of being in the world that is simultaneously local and global, traditional and contemporary, serious and playful. In their different ways, both authors demonstrate that fantasy, far from being a frivolous or derivative genre, is a powerful vehicle for cultural meaning-making in post-millennial India. Their works invite readers to see the world as enchanted—whether through the exuberant hybridity of Basu's GameWorld or the quiet marvels of Prabhu's destination thrillers— and in doing so, to imagine identity not as a fixed inheritance but as an ongoing, creative act of world-building.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the magical realms constructed by Samit Basu and Manjiri Prabhu function as sophisticated sites of cultural expression and identity negotiation in post-

millennial Indian English fiction. The comparative analysis revealed two distinctive approaches to the fantastic. Basu's *GameWorld* operates as a postmodern, globalized hybrid space where Indian mythology coexists irreverently with Western fantasy tropes, popular culture references, and self-aware humor. By populating his secondary world with vanars and rakshases alongside dragons and manticores, Basu creates a third space that deconstructs the very notion of cultural purity. The parody and intertextuality that characterize *The Simoqin Prophecies* are not mere stylistic flourishes but strategies for normalizing a multicultural, non-Western perspective as the unmarked center of epic fantasy.

Prabhu, in contrast, grounds her fantasy in contemporary spaces—a Swedish university campus, a Bavarian hotel, the streets of Kolkata—embedding supernatural elements such as rune divination, legendary figures, and ancient symbols within mystery-thriller frameworks. Where Basu's hybridity is global and parodic, Prabhu's is local and restorative. Her destination thrillers enchant specific geographies, recovering local histories, astrology, and ancient symbols as resources for solving mysteries and connecting characters across time and space. Her work demonstrates that fantasy need not construct a secondary world to perform cultural work; the intrusion of the marvelous into the everyday can be equally potent.

Both authors, however, share a crucial characteristic: they move beyond the burden of postcolonial representation. Neither writes fantasy that is merely an allegory of nation or a response to colonial trauma. Instead, as Varughese's concept of Bharati fantasy suggests, their works participate in a global genre conversation while remaining unmistakably rooted in South Asian cultural reference points. This is the source of their cultural expression: they make fantasy a space where identity is not fixed or defended but produced, hybridized, and played with.

The paper's findings suggest several avenues for future research. First, a fuller account of Indian English fantasy would require examining other significant voices, such as Krishna Udayasankar (*The Aryavarta Chronicles*), Tasha Suri (*The Books of Ambha*), and Samit Basu's own later works in superhero and dystopian modes. Second, the question of readership and reception deserves empirical investigation: how do Indian and international audiences interpret the hybrid strategies analyzed here? Third, the relationship between literary fantasy and other media—film, graphic novels, web series—is increasingly significant, as Basu's own work as a filmmaker and Prabhu's television production background suggest. Finally, theoretical work is needed to refine the concept of Bharati

fantasy and distinguish it from magical realism, urban fantasy, and other overlapping genres.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that magical realms in the fiction of Samit Basu and Manjiri Prabhu are not escapes from reality but laboratories of it.

Through their different strategies—Basu's exuberant, postmodern hybridity and Prabhu's enchanted destination thrillers—they invite readers to imagine Indian identity not as a fixed inheritance but as an ongoing, playful, and creative negotiation. In doing so, they exemplify a vital new direction in Indian English literature, one that recognizes fantasy as a legitimate and powerful mode of cultural expression for a globalized, post- millennial India.

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