



The Achievers Journal

Volume 7, Issue 1

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 January to March 2021

Religious Constructs and the Portrayal of Supernatural Characters: A Comparative Analysis of Select Literary Classics

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Abstract

Supernatural characters mostly form archetypal motifs in many literary writings meaningfully. In this context, the present paper attempts at making comparative study by analysing the socio-cultural influences and modalities of select litterateurs from England and India of different times and genres those who pioneer in supernatural writings. Firstly, it puts forth the role of supernatural characters in the writings of the English authors in the forms of soothsayers and apparitions in Shakespeare; necromancy in University wits and compares them with traditional supernatural writings of India like epical, mythological, Buddhist petas and tantric writings. Then, it reflects on mesmerism in the Gothic writings which is extended up to the role of animagi and metamorphomagi in J.K.Rowling's Harry Potter and compares with the writings of Tagore; ghost stories of Trailokyanath Bandopadhyaya, Satyjit Ray, Tarasankar, and Manoj Das reflecting on spiritual psychic elements; Samit Basu presents Simoqin prophesies; Shweta Taneja's concept of cult of chaos, etc. Then, an in-depth critical evaluation has been done regarding the importance of the supernatural characters in such writings from the artistic and philosophical point of views and stylistic factors. It is observed that the traditional authors of both the countries have blended mythological and socio-cultural motifs based on supernatural realities whereas in the modern times, the writers are intertextual, scientific as well as artistic and what's more, the contemporary writers have been creating new forms unique to their domains of writing or genres.

Keywords: supernatural, mesmerism, tantric tradition, peta, psychic element, motifs



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1. Introduction

First Witch: When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Second Witch: When the hurly-burly's done,

When the battle's lost and won. (Line 1-4, Sc.1, Act.1. *Macbeth*)

These lines mark the impressive beginning of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Worth saying, human world has always been allured by some sort of fear, fantasy, miracle or suspense, and the like and this happens to be very much a part of our cultural beliefs. Contents in literary writings referring to spirits, weird elements, psychophony, etc satisfy one of the major readerly or artistic aesthetic components. Critics of our time those who favour realism in literature are of the opinion that horror, magic realism, fantasy, supernatural are deviant features in literature. (Brooks quoted by Smajic in "Supernatural Realism"). But it can be modestly argued that supernatural in literature has been obtained from a number of potential supporting factors associated with mythological, ancient scriptural, religious and creative sources. Some such characters have Biblical, Vedic, epical, prejudiced and ritualistic origin too. As a result, right from the time of the ancient writings till the contemporary horror and detective stories, the supernatural characters assume important positions in the form of ghosts, spirits, vampires, angels, and some other unseen forms. While attributing artistic positions to such elements, the authors incorporate not only creative but also moral, religious, spiritual, *tantra* and *mantra* traditions in order to bring out befitting literary taste in their respective writings. What's more, some of the writings become highly imaginative and philosophical only because of the presence of such elements as characters. It may be Alladin fulfilling the wishes or *Vetal* flying swiftly in the dark stormy night in search of truth; an invisible angel stands as benefactor; rising corpse from the graveyard; a *brahmarakshasa*



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residing in a cave or tools like horcrux, pills and potions, alchemy and magic rod used for sorcery. In this context, this paper focuses critically on three components of the presence of the supernatural elements. They are the socio-cultural influences on the authors synchronically; artistry associated with supernatural characters; and a comparative evaluation of use of such characters basing on some of the selected writings from England and India. It includes writings from these two countries because supernatural literature is strong in the both the countries and already a wider spectrum of critical works has been done comparing the content and style of the writings of both the countries.

2. Supernatural in the British Literature: A Critical Focus

To begin with, supernatural elements are very much present there in most of the popular writings in English literature. It ranges from the plays of Shakespeare to Marlowe and then to gets vital constructs in Horace Walpole, Dickens and modern generation writers like J.K.Rowling and many others. The experiment continues as such till now.

2.1 Supernatural in the tragedies of Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Ghost or supernatural plays an important role in Shakespearean tragedies. Shakespeare has introduced ghosts and witches which have supernatural knowledge. For example, in *Hamlet*, the supernatural appears in the form of the ghost. The ghost in fact is the hero of it. It is often felt that without ghost in *Hamlet*, the whole play falls to pieces. The ghost in *Hamlet* has at least a three-fold dramatic significance; it contributes to the general tragic utterances of the play; it monitors the entire action of the play; it shows up the essential manifestations of characters and drives home a certain moral effect. Elizabethan audience believed in ghosts, witches, portents, omens and their harmful effects. Thus, the introduction of the ghosts and witches was a revolutionary innovation in Elizabethan drama.



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Analysing the effects of the supernatural elements in *Macbeth* would be a good attempt. The witches' prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo in the beginning of the play happens to be the most important as they say that Macbeth will become the king. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, upon hearing the witches' prophecies decide that it is Macbeth's fate to become the king. So, they take the "near'st way" to this position by murdering Duncan. It is Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's belief in the truth of the prophesy which propel them to murder. Instead of letting the prophesy come true on their own, they make them happen. In the play, it is noticed that the witches have several roles: that of instigators, tempters, and prophets. Then, in *Julius Caesar*, a ghost also appears to a leading character on the eve of battle. On the night before the Battle of Philippi, Brutus is sleepless while all around him doze off. As the candle flickers, a 'monstrous apparition' (4.3.278) appears to him who is the ghost of the murdered Julius Caesar. Brutus interrogates the ghost, asking whether it is 'some god, some angel, or some devil' (4.3.279). Caesar's ghost seems to represent something much more personal to Brutus and to us too. It represents the things that haunt our lives and our dreams and return to us in our most solitary moments of reflection. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the supernatural serves both to create conflict in the play and also to create resolution. Conflict is created when Oberon decides to punish his wife Titania for not obeying his will and refusing to relinquish the changeling Indian boy to him. Oberon is immensely jealous of her possession of the boy because the boy is particularly beautiful and Oberon had wanted to raise him to be his knight. While focusing on his much-acclaimed play *The Tempest*, it is noticed that Shakespeare displays the act of magic to mesmerize the audience. The entire plot of this play is very reliant on the supernatural. Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban all have magical powers. Magic lets these characters, mainly Prospero manipulate the other characters and make them do their bidding. Magic also manoeuvres the plot, relationships, love and themes of the play. Magic is the motivation behind movement and plot development. Shakespeare wanted a happy ending in order to make it happen, the characters and events have been manipulated through magic.



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2.2.1 Shakespeare, Witchcraft and the Supernatural

Religion was a dominant factor in people's daily life in England during the time of Shakespeare. There are philosophical reasons behind this. At that time, physical science was not developed enough. As revealed by some historians, in Shakespeare's days, people were extremely superstitious. During the Elizabethan era people blamed unexplainable events such as the Bubonic Plague, unexplained deaths or unpleasant illnesses are to be the work of witches. In *Macbeth*, he used characters such as the witches to bring dark magic and suspense. In 1542 Parliament passed the Witchcraft Act which defined witchcraft as a crime punishable by death. It was repealed five years later, but restored by a new Act in 1562. A further law was passed in 1604 during the reign of James I who took a keen interest in demonology and even published a book on it. The 1562 and 1604 Acts transferred the trial of witches from the Church to the ordinary courts. In addition, he was greatly by the Greek and Roman mythology as well as the Greek dramas written centuries ago.

3. The Character of Mephistopheles and the Concept of Hell in Marlowe (1564-93)'s *Dr. Faustus*

Mephistopheles is the most important dramatic celebrity in *Dr. Faustus*. He appears in most of the scenes with Faustus. When he is first seen by Faustus, he looks dreadfully ugly. Faustus immediately sends him away and then he reappears in the form of a Franciscan friar. The mere physical appearance of Mephistopheles suggests the malice of hell itself. Throughout the play, Faustus seems to have forgotten how ugly the devils are in their natural shape. Only at the very end of the drama, when devils come to carry Faustus off to his eternal damnation, he understands the terrible implication of their ugly physical appearance. In most of the scenes, Mephistopheles functions as the representative of hell and Lucifer. Upon Faustus' firmness to know about the nature of hell, Mephistopheles discloses that it is not a place, but a condition or state of being. He



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leaves a message that heaven is being admitted into the presence of God, and hell, is deprivation of the presence of God. This definition of hell resembled to the newly founded canon of the Anglican Church, which had then broken with the Roman Catholic Church. But Marlowe uses a medieval concept of hell for dramatic purposes. The devils appear in the final scene as Faustus anticipates his eternal damnation, and there are strong suggestions and images of a hell consisting of severe punishment and torment, where ugly devils cloud about and punish the unremorseful sinner. So, here the supernatural character has been used for purely purgatorial and moral purposes. The spirit of renaissance and the dilemma of adopting the right path to wisdom and power (Araalvz: 2012) have been reflected in the play beautifully.

4. Discourses of *Yoga*, *Tantra* and *Bhakti*: Typical Life Transforming Steps in Indian Cultural and Religious System Reflected in Literature

Indian culture, history, mythology, religion and literature have potential resources of varieties of forms and roles of supernatural powers. They can be found in the *Vedas*, the major epics like *The Mahābhārata* and *The Rāmāyaṇa*, the *purāṇas* and in the texts of various philosophical schools and religious traditions. There are especially Śaiva tantric ones practicing *mukti/mumukṣu* and *bhukti/bubhukṣu*, the attainment of liberation on the one hand and worldly enjoyment on the other, and these include attainment of supernatural powers. Yoga and Tantra traditions are the context where it is most heavily situated which is related to *jñāna*, *aiśvarya*, *siddhi* and *vibhūti* as in *The Yogasūtra*, *bala* in *The Mahābhārata*, *guṇa* in *Haṭhayoga* works, *guṇāṣṭaka* and more often *siddhi* in Śaiva Tantric contexts, *iddhi*, *abhiññā*, *adhiṣṭhāna* and *vikurvaṇa* in Buddhist Pāli texts, and *ṛddhi* and *labdhi* in Jain texts. So, from this, it is clear that the role of the supernatural is manifold and very much associated with the domain of a complete store of knowledge, intense ritualistic culture and spiritual beliefs. This potential has been transformed into the tapestry of literature too.



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4.1 Supernatural in the Ancient Indian Literature

Vishnusharma's *The Panchatantra* is a widely read book of fables in which there are supernatural elements present as characters. For example, in a story, there was a city called Mahilaropya in the southern country. In it there ruling a king named Amar Shakti. He was like a wish fulfilling tree to the multitudes of supplicants, and his feet shone with rays of light reflected from the jewelled crowns of the kings he had subdued. He was also an adept in all the sciences but his three sons, named Vasu Shakti, Ugra Shakti and Anek Shakti, were extremely dull headed princes.

The well-known story "Vikram Aur Betaal" is based on *Betaal Pachisi*, written in the 11th century by Kashmiri poet Somdev Bhatt. These are mesmerising stories told to the wise King Vikramaditya by the witty ghost Betaal. Vikramaditya was a great king who ruled over a flourishing kingdom from his capital at Ujjain. He had immense love for learning as well as for adventure. He was brave, fearless with strong will power. According to the legend the King Vikramaditya, in order to fulfil a vow was required to remove a corpse of Betaal from a treetop and carry it on his shoulder to another place in silence. *En route*, the spirit of Betaal (in the corpse) used to narrate a story to the king and after completing the story Betaal would pose a query that if he (the king) knew the answer, was bound to respond lest he will break his head into thousand pieces. Moral and religious messages along with defining the right duty of person are what are learnt from this.

4.2 Petavatthu as a Supernatural Element in Buddhist Literature

The Petavatthu, the ghost series is a Theravada Buddhist scripture, included in the Minor Collection (Khuddaka Nikaya) of the Pali Canon's *Sutta Pitaka*. It apparently reports stories about and conversations among the Buddha and his disciples. It is composed of 51 verse narratives describing specifically how the effects of bad acts can lead to rebirth into the unhappy



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world of *petas* (ghosts) in the doctrine of *karma*. More importantly, it details how meritorious actions by the living can benefit such suffering beings. The scripture also includes stories of Maudgalyayana's travels to the Hungry Ghost realm and his discussions with Hungry ghosts and his understanding of the realm. It also includes a story of how Sariputta rescued his mother from hell by making offerings to the monks as a form of merit-making to increase the chance of a hungry ghost being reborn as a higher being. The scripture gave prominence to the doctrine that giving alms to monks may benefit the ghosts of one's relatives.

4.3 Jataka Tales as an Integral Part of Indian Supernatural Literature

Most of the *Jataka* stories refer to supernatural of the Buddha as having the power to recall events of the past and past lives of persons and even of animals. It is fictitious belief that the Buddha possessed supernatural powers, magical power, the magic eye, the Divine eye, that he could go to any of the heavens whenever he chose to be in the company of gods and celestial beings, that he could travel through the air from one country to another at any time. That he had the supernatural, magical power to see what others could not, was also fictional belief.

4.4 Supernatural in Kalidas

In Kalidas' *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, supernatural characters are autonomous and represent a scheme of existence recurrently. It is reflected in the actions of the jester being beaten by the invisible Matali or Shakuntala being drifted away by her mother's spirit away to the heavenly abode. Not only this, it is noticed in the events of repeated interference of demons and their nuisance; Durvasa's use of supernatural power; role of nymph Sanumati in uniting the king and the queen, etc.

Now, we would like to introduce a comparative reflection on the modern supernatural literature both in England and India. It is observed that in the ancient and medieval writings of both



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England and India, the role of socio-cultural and religious supernatural elements is no more there. One would rather find that supernatural characters have become transformed into more and more fantastic roles and pose to be the parts of the supernatural aesthetic carrying along the emotion of the reader.

5. Supernatural in the 18th & 19th Century English Literature

Gothic literature began in the mid-eighteenth-century with Horace Walpole (1717-97)'s *The Castle of Otranto* which is widely considered to be the first true work of Gothic fiction. However, the genre did not truly take off until the Victorian era which covered most of the nineteenth-century. The truth behind the influence of Gothic literature can be found in two of its most common themes: the supernatural and madness. When reading and reviewing Gothic texts, the occurrence of ghosts, mysterious apparitions, and unexplainable sounds and events is apparent. There were themes of insanity based on hallucination, anxiety, and complete mental. In *Castle of Otranto*, the first supernatural element is the curse on the family of Manfred, the villain of the story. It contains numerous supernatural events. At the very beginning of the story, a giant helmet falls, seemingly right out of the sky, and kills Manfred's son. There are many findings of an apparent giant in the castle by the servants. The appearance of a giant is not only a supernatural event, but also a fulfilment of the prophecy from the beginning of the story. Additionally, Manfred sees a painting come to life; Frederic sees a ghost in Hippolita's room, and blood drips from the nose of the statue of Alfonso. All of these elements add to the air of suspense throughout the story.

In the 19th century England, exploration has been done in the area of mesmerism, spiritualism and 'true' ghost stories in the period. The mesmerist would throw his subject into a trance, allowing the passage of energy into the weaker body of his/her patient, as if literally recharging their battery. Similarly, spiritualism saturates Victorian literary culture. It is the background for



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the obsession with ghost stories, gentler returns than the histrionics of the Gothic. Catherine Crowe (1803-76)'s best-selling book, *The Night-Side of Nature* (1848) collected anecdotes and stories that hovered somewhere between truth and thrilling tale. Although Charles Dickens (1812-70) ridiculed spiritualism, his popular journals helped establish the Christmas ghost story, a tradition that was sustained as a ritual as late as the Edwardian M. R. James. Female sensitivity to the spirit-world also helped establish the supernatural tale as the reserve of women writers, including fine contributions from Margaret Oliphant to Vernon Lee and Edith Wharton.

In 1882, a group of earnest intellectuals founded the Society for Psychical Research. They aimed to investigate the claims of Mesmerism, Spiritualism and authenticated 'true' ghost stories. They did so by developing an extraordinary jargon of 'psychical research' that fused the latest advances in the physical and psychological sciences with their hopes for proof of a supermundane world. The Society called haunted houses 'phantasmogenetic centres' and theorised mediumship as the result of 'telepathy' or 'subliminal uprushes' from unknown psychical faculties.

5.1 The Supernatural in *Harry Potter*

A remarkable turn comes in J. K. Rowling (1965-)'s *Harry Potter* which is a series of fantasy novel portraying the lives of a young wizard, Harry Potter, and his friends Hermione and Ron. They are the students of Hogwart School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The story circles round Harry's struggle against Voldemort, a dark wizard who wants to become immortal. Harry in his adolescence learns how to overcome a series of magical, social, personal and professional problems. The use of alchemy, magic wands, flying broomsticks, centaurs, strange magical creatures, alternate universe and lot many novel elements are really interesting.

6. Supernatural in Modern Indian English Literature



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6.1 Supernatural in Tagore's Stories

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)'s writings are characterised by mystic, rational, deeply philosophic and supernatural tone. His story "Nishithey" contains the trappings of Gothic fiction – a large crumbling mansion, the wife associated in her sickness and in her dangerously distorted love with images of confinement together with an extended psychological analysis of the mystic events. Tagore uses mystery, horror and the super-natural to give substance to his realistic concerns. The artistic beauty of "The Hungry Stones" as a supernatural story is that it creates an atmosphere at once metaphysical yet factual, at once imaginative yet probable. It satisfies the readers about their momentary disbelief of the supernatural atmosphere by dragging readers into the opacity of the poet's awful conscience. The story pervades a mysterious romantic atmosphere that becomes a subject of extra sensual feeling – a sixth sense. In fact, the entire story is the pure fabrication of the sub-conscious mind of the collector of cotton duties at Barich.

6.2 R.K.Narayan (1906-2001) and the Supernatural

Apart from strong mythological, religious, astrological instances basing on prejudices and strange way of interpretations, some of his writings have a supernatural basis. He strikes such popular Indian beliefs as mystic trance; possession of the body by the good or the evil forces, the dead coming to life, etc. As in his story, "Old Man of the Temple" deals with such theme where an old priest murdered long ago takes possession of a driver who has to be exorcised. "An Accident" is another such story in which the ghost of a driver is as loyal to his master. Further in some of his stories, he has dealt with this theme as just to create pure humour. This can be judged in the story "Cat Within". In this a cat while chasing a rat enters a shop and affixes its head in a brass jug. In the state of desperation, it starts jumping and banging the walls creating a loud noise. The shop owner and his neighbours assembled there in a state of horror assuming the presence of some super natural power in the shop.



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6.3 Supernatural in the Stories of Manoj Das (1934-) and Ruskin Bond(1934-)

Mystery, mysticism and occultism are the basic ingredients of Indianness which are noticed in the stories of Manoj Das. In the story “Sita’s Marriage”, the element of mysticism lies in child Sita’s dream and her mysterious death just before her marriage. Sita, who is very eager to find a suitable bridegroom for her, visualizes Rama Chandra to be her real groom. In her dream she sees the same sight as she has imagined before: Rama, as a charming boy but not without his mighty bow and his crown of burning gold, had come to her as her bridegroom, accompanied by a host of child-gods amidst heavenly music. This mystic faith resumes its curve in the story “Laxmi’s Adventure”. Laxmi, a six-year-old girl meets God in her dreams. The idol inside the village temple is a living reality for her. She is used to talk to the God in the temple during noon hours when the priest is already asleep and snoring outside the temple. One day, Laxmi in her child-like innocence discloses her heart’s anguish over many things she concerns for - prayers through loud speakers, the money-lender’s cruelty towards her father, her father’s helplessness, her own desire for a frock remaining unfulfilled, her mother’s forbearing everything. Laxmi is a true devotee, believing innocently in the physical presence of God in that idol. This untimely death of Laxmi like Sita has something mystical in it. Their relationship with God, their departure - all is mysteries from a particular point of view.

Das is of the belief that there are numerous realities beyond the surface realities that our eyes meet. Ordinary human beings for their lack of true knowledge fail to realize it but saints and sages marvel with their realization of various invisible realities and live a blessed life. He clarifies this in his story “The Sage of Tarungiri” about a mysterious sage and seven selfish old men who seek his blessings to overcome the worries and anxieties of their life. For Manoj Das,



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ghosts, imps like supernatural elements belong to some other plane of reality. It seems as if he has a special fascination for ghosts. More or less, ghost story of the author creates an atmosphere of mystery as one reads by.

Ruskin Bond over the years has compiled several editions of beautiful and enchanting 'Supernatural' lore which include' *Ghost stories from Raj*, *The Rupa Book of Nightmare Tales*, *The Rupa Book of Haunted Houses*. *Scary Stories*, *Spooky Encounters* and *The Rupa's Supernatural Omnibus*. He himself has written and published around forty long and short ghost stories, most of which are published in his collections including, *A Season of Ghosts* and *A Face in the Dark and Other Encounters*. Bond seems to have typically worked on the practical experiences of ghost stories mixing up with humour and irony. Bond's writing as it comes from India is more than aware of the Zeitgeist of supernatural lore in traditional writings and the sway they have over the population. Rudyard Kipling also borrowed extensively from the supernatural in order to bring colour to his works especially for children.

6.4 Supernatural in Other Modern Indian Authors

The Simoqin Prophecies by Samit Basu (1979-) happens to be the first book of the Game World trilogy. The Simoqin Prophecies is a fascinating Indian fantasy fiction. The entire series is fantastical but humorous at the same time, referencing great Indian epics such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, and even going into Star Wars territory at times. Similarly, *The Guardians of the Halahala* by Shatrujeet Nath is deeply immersed in Indian mythology. This is the first book of the Vikramaditya series and uses the *Samudra-manthan* (churning the ocean) as its fundamental point. While initially believed by all that the deadly poison or *halahala* (severe poison) which sprang from the ocean was consumed in its entirety by Shiv, it turns out a small part has survived and can be made into an all-powerful weapon, threatening the very existence of mankind. It is up to Samrat Vikramidtya and his Council of Nine to save the world. In another



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dimension, *Cult of Chaos* by Shweta Taneja (1980-) introduces us to Anantya Tantrist, a *tantrik* who has chosen to abandon the values of her clan and live by her own code. Extremely taut and edgy, the book is set in a Delhi which is run by the men of a *tantrik* clan called the Kaula. In order to save young girls from being sacrificed in the name of dark magic, Anantya has to fight various supernatural forces, evil *tantriks* from other fraternities, and even a giant three-headed cobra. This book is a fine example of Indian fantasy fiction.

7. Critical Comparison and Conclusion

Supernatural elements stand as metaphors and universally accepted mental constructs for expressing weird, fantastic, horror and impossible happenings which are obvious in human life. The transcendent domain of supernatural reality (Klemm: 2007) achieves a subjective status in the hands of the writers of both the countries. It is noticed that supernatural characters and events in British literature right from the ancient time is an outcome of the traditional socio-cultural beliefs and prejudices. But, the delineation of characters and events in literary texts is purely artistic, provides entertainment and advocate the limitations of human being. On the contrary, in Indian context, supernatural characters of the ancient days are associated with spiritual practices. A scrutiny of the texts dealing with the supernatural from England and India can be categorised as ‘mimetic literature’ that is set in a recognizable world and the other is fantastic and foreign to us. The reader is in the real world in one whereas the other is unreal leading to ‘ontological separations from our world.’ (Fabrizi: 2018). This division of the writings are applied to the supernatural writings of both the countries. But, as a matter of fact, the metaphysical and ethical considerations are more profound in the ancient supernatural literature of India. In addition, the modern writings of England are more of personal creations. The writers of both the countries have focused on moral and spiritual influences in the pretext of the supernatural. If we make a scrutiny of the use of supernatural characters in the writings of both England and India along the ages till now, we find that from moral lessons, it has reached purely at a stage of fantastic



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entertainment with prototypes or modern forms or avatars of the supernatural characters. Additionally, writers have deeply delved into the psychic elements of human being as well as many unexplored areas of mythology to take up new dimensions of supernatural domain into literature as attempt in exercising inter-textual, hypo-textual and hyper-textual levels. It may be *Harry Potter* or *The Simoqin Prophecies*, the supernatural reserves an innovative and unavoidable position. The supernatural characters are foregrounded to bring out a good literary effect in comparison to realistic, symbolist, expressionistic or existential literature.

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