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Digitized Magical Realism and The Intersectional Politics of Disability, Gender, And Class in Sumaira Hameed's Novella Tulip

Zeba Munib
Ph.D.
Jamia Millia Islamia
Faculty of Social Sciences
New Delhi

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines Sumaira Hameed's[1] novella Tulip through the lens of digitized magical realism to examine the intersections of disability, gender, class, and urban modernization. The term 'digitized magical realism' is intentionally employed to justify the author's deliberate use of mystical element in the contemporary society that is indifferent to the plight of people with disabilities. This study focuses on Abu Bakr, the male protagonist of the novella, born with the invisible disability of speech impairment, but his condition can be improved with a costly surgery as suggested by his doctors. Hameed employed an inanimate object, a mystical paper, Tulip, as a bridge of communication between him and the outside world. Alizah, the young woman, has exclusive access to the mystical Tulip paper, which allows her to read and communicate Abu Bakr's internal thoughts to the outside world, as well as listen to and understand the plight of a person who cannot speak but has aspirations and dreams of making a place in society. The paper argues that disability in the novella is a socially produced condition influenced by ableism, economic productivity, and cultural indifference. The study focuses on Alizah, a working-class young woman dealing with modern instability, to emphasize gendered labour, ethical mediation, and feminist care as politically significant practices.*

KEYWORDS: *Disability studies, digitized magical realism, gender and care, political economy, urban precarity.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Sumaira Hameed's novella, Tulip, is a remarkably simple yet poignantly detailed narrative that shows how the disabled body, technology, and societal structures collectively affect the experiential reality of the people with disabilities. In this novella, Sumaira uses an inanimate object, a light brown rough paper, that looks like an old manuscript or some antique map of the treasure of some ancient Greek emperor, as imagined and reflected through the thoughts of one of the protagonists of the novel, Alizah. The novella begins with this line, and it sets the theme of the novel right from the beginning:

"Zindagi ek sahir hai aur ham iska jaadu.' (p. 01)

Translation: "The world is enchanting and we are its magic."

The paradox and irony are that the author uses an inanimate object to help a mute and disabled person, as there is no other hope for the lonely, helpless, and socially excluded Abu Bakr, who is on the brink of committing suicide.

The narrative centers on the lives of two young individuals, Abu Bakr and Alizah, whose paths accidentally cross on a New York street on a rainy afternoon. The interaction is characterized by strangeness and anonymity; Alizah's mobile phone had fallen into Abu Bakr's coat pocket, and later, when she tried to find her phone, she saw its picture on the mystical Tulip paper with Abu Bakr sitting in front of it. Somehow, Alizah discovered that Abu Bakr was involved and accused him of stealing her mobile phone; at that moment, Abu

[1]Sumaira Hameed born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1979, is a prolific Urdu author renowned for her distinct style of fiction writing, known for the term, "kitchen fiction" that means the space where women can read. Her works, originally serialised in Urdu Magazines and on social media platforms, stand out for their lyrical prose and exploration of social issue, women's empowerment, and patriarchy. Hameed's writing breaks from traditional conventions, blending enchanting storytelling with satire and elements of magical realism.

Bakr's thoughts began to appear on the mystical tulip paper, marking the first time it became functional for her. She became the only bridge between Abu Bakr's silent thoughts and the world and helped him to come out of his terrible condition, where he was on the verge of committing suicide. When Abu Bakr's mother attempted to pay Alizah for the assistance provided through the Tulip paper, the mystical paper ceased to function, clearly indicating that some things do not work for material gain. During this inward journey, Alizah discovered a new, more empathetic version of herself and felt extremely ecstatic about finding her new self and the happiness that comes from helping someone in dire need unconditionally. The novella operates as a subtle social satire that exposes society's indifference, discomfort, and structural neglect toward people with disabilities. (Hameed, 2012).

Drawing insights from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, every aspect of society is permeated by pervasive freak discourses that highlight the clean dichotomies between normal and abnormal. The silence that often surrounds the affected individuals makes it challenging for them to communicate their experiences to others, making them completely excluded from the society (Thomson, 2009). Abu Bakr's condition with both visible and invisible disabilities marked him outside the realm of the normative standards of "normalcy." His speech impairment and later serious physical injuries do not merely limit his bodily functions; they place him outside the normative frameworks of capitalist modernity, where value is siphoned from productivity, fluency, and visibility (Siebers, 2008).

Subsequently, Alizah, a young ambitious woman, is struggling to carve a niche for herself in the city of New York. She is working-class and has a restless ambition that is like the city's heartbeat that she longs for. The harsh reality of gig work and not having enough money to live in New York City keeps bringing her down, even though her fantasies of living and making it big in the city shine like the lights of the buildings she wants to live in. Drawing insights from Fraser's dual conception of injustice, which includes the lack of material resources and cultural exclusion, these factors deeply intertwine to shape an individual's social mobility (Fraser, 1997).

The presence of a mystical yet digital object, the tulip paper, makes the narrative uniquely mysterious and strange in a good way. The object is neither completely mystical nor fully digital; it becomes a space of mediation where consciousness flows seamlessly between the human mind (Abu Bakr's thoughts), paper (the rough light brown paper that seems like a map of old treasure of an ancient civilization), and mobile screen (Alizah's phone, to which she pasted the mystical paper behind to have easy access to it). The unique combo of all these elements constitutes what this paper terms "digitized magical realism," a narrative digital and mystical device that binds together the analog and the technological, the mystical and the digital, and the corporeal and the virtual. Borrowing from Slemon, magical realism deconstructs dominant and normative knowledge systems that allow the voices of the marginalized people to be foregrounded and heard (Slemon, 1995).

II. DISABILITY, VOICE, SILENCE, AND DIGITAL MEDIATION

The entire narrative is reverberated with philosophical underpinnings of the sensitive core of Abu Bakr's inner world. His silence is not the absence of his words, but what he really and truly wants to speak and to say and to communicate freely. His silence is not emptiness; it is an overflowing reservoir of emotions, reflections, memories, and desires that communicates well with the readers; a person who cannot speak, can have small aspirations, and little desires to make him happy make the normal people contemplate that life exists only between those little moments and people often tend to lose that happiness with their busy schedule and infinite goals and skyrocketed aspirations. Abu Bakr's inner monologue reflecting his desires is poignantly captured in the following lines from the novella:

"Usey bolney ki hasrat thee. Woh chahta tha ki wo bhi bohot si batein karey. Besuri hi sahi per apni awaz mein ganey gaye, whistle bajayey, Kisi ke kaan khaye. Normal logon ki trah lateefey sunaye or khud hi qahqahey lagaye (p. 06)."

Translation: "He wished to speak only. He wished he could talk endlessly like others. Even if off-key, he wanted to sing in his own voice, whistle freely, tease people, crack jokes like 'normal' people, and burst into laughter himself."

The above lines are the most powerful way that Tulip talks about "disabled desire." Abu Bakr doesn't want to perform great things or be a hero; he wants something very normal. He wants to sing, crack jokes, playful with others, and laugh as much as he wants. This longing for the ordinary, for what able-bodied people takes for granted, changes how we think about disability from a lack to an exclusion from common joys.

The phrase "Besuri hi sahi, par apni awaaz mein gaane gaaye" is very important. Abu Bakr doesn't want to be perfect; he wants to be there. His imagined off-key singing goes against the ableist need for precision, fluidity, and polish. In this regard, the novel undermines the normative criteria of voice and performance that Davis designates as fundamental to the formation of "normalcy" (Davis, 2013).

"Usey likh kar baat karney ka routine jaari karna parta tha. Lekin likhi huee batein parhne ka kis ke paas waqt hota hai. Zaban walon ki duniya mei bezabanon ke kahey aur ankahey lafzon ki value hi kitni hoti

hai. Ham itne masruf ho chukey hai aur hamare paas waqt ki itni kami ho chuki hai ki ham jo bol saktey hai unhey sun nahi saktey hai to jo bol nahi sakte, unhe kaise sunegein (p. 07)."

Translation: "He had to continue the routine of communicating through writing. But, in this busy world, who has the time to read written words? In a world of those who possess speech, what can be the value does the spoken or unspoken words of the speechless really have? We have become so busy in our own little worlds, so short of time, that we cannot even listen to those who can speak, then, how we will listen to those who cannot?"

The above passage reinforces this criticism by shifting from desire to accumulated apathy. Abu Bakr's reliance on written communication highlights a stark paradox: while writing allows him to express himself, it also reveals the indifference of a culture that refuses to connect with words. His question, "likhi hui baatein parhne ka kis ke paas waqt hota hai?" reflects a culture that prioritizes speed, efficiency, and convenience.

The phrase "zubaan walon ki duniya" (the world of those who possess speech) is a figurative line that distinguishes people who can speak from those who can't. In this world, even spoken phrases lose their value if they make things less efficient. Abu Bakr's assertion that society fails to heed even articulate individuals highlights what Garland-Thomson (2009) refers to as 'selective attention': visibility and audibility are afforded solely to bodies that align with normative standard.

Harlan Hahn noted that isolated experiences that people with disabilities face in their daily lives is due the fact that "the pervasive sense of physical and social isolation produced not only by the restrictions of the built environment but also by the aversive reactions of the nondisabled that often consign them to the role of distant friends or even, mascots rather than to a more intimate status as peers, competitors, or mates (Harlan, 1986).

This passage also turns the narrative towards digitized mediation. Abu Bakr's words exist even in his silence but float in a communicative economy indifferent to such discourses outside the perimeters of normative standards of speech. Abu Bakar's use of a smartphone app and later his communication through Tulip paper come out not as a tech-savvy habit or culture but as a mandatory necessity for his basic survival. Drawing from Hearn, the digital and technological access is never neutral or guaranteed but dependent upon physical ability and social care (Hearn, 2017).

The narrative frames the disability of Abu Bakr as a condition produced not by silence itself, but by a world unwilling to listen. Drawing insights from disability scholars Garland-Thomson (2009) and Davis (2013), Abu Bakr's muteness placed him within the constructed norms of disability, a society consumed with performance and verbal assertion; his disturbing silence rendered him both hyper-visible and ignored in his environment.

Abu Bakr's conscious about his inability to speak and articulate enforces both compulsory able-bodiedness. Compulsory able-bodiedness is a theory created by disability studies scholar Robert McRuer states that like heterosexuality, able-bodiedness is treated as the default or normal requirement for life and those who cannot conform to it are rejected by society (McRuer, 2003).

Abu Bakrs' mother's apprehension about his future and her desperate, repeated attempts to convince a complete stranger, Alizah to help her son; she also offered her jewellery to Alizah in lieu of helping out Abu Bakr is a profound reflection that families of differently- abled individuals live with. Disability scholars have theorized that this fear is behind much of the prejudice toward people with disabilities in our culture. Visible disabilities remind people of their own vulnerability and mortality (Cheyne, 2013).

Abu Bakr was completely dependent on his smartphone app that helped him communicate with the world; he was able to converse, laugh, and crack jokes with the digital aid, and he was also trying to develop an app for deaf and mute people before his accident, where he had serious physical injuries completely forbidding him to make use of his phone app. Borrowing from Hearn's concepts of the digital reconfiguration of subjectivity (2009), Abu Bakr's technological dependency is fragile; when he loses his hands, he loses the medium that provided him communicative agency through his smartphone application (Hearn, 2009). The following line from the novella is a telling reality of an individual dealing with and surviving with a disability in this world.

'Mukaammal insanon ki duniya mein adhurey insaan ko bahut himmat se kaam lena parta hai (p. 06)."

Translation: "In the world of normal and complete human beings, an incomplete person needs lots of sheer determination and iron strength."

Abu Bakr's lament in the above line is not merely self-pity; it is an ontological statement about living in a world calibrated for able-bodiedness. The line echoes Davis's (1995) assertion that disability becomes tragic only within a culture obsessed with the "complete," seamless body. The poignancy of his words intensifies after the accident, when even the small technologies that once enabled him break down.

Abu Bakr's reflection:

"Ham Jaise log paida hotey hi Sabr karna seekh jatey hain. Qadam-Qadam per hamarey sath aise waqeyaat hotey hai ki ham inke aadi ho jatey hai. Is duniya mein ache aur bure sab log hai, lekin bure log zyada hai aur

hame baar baar miltey hai. Dhoka dete hai, taklieef dete hai. Kyun ki ham jante hai ki hame apni mazoori hi nahi normal logon ki zahni mazoori aur lalaach ko Bhi jhelna hai. Ham hans kar har aisi baat ko "Let it go" kah kar ya to taal dete hai ya bhul jane ka natak karte hai taki normal logon ke abnormal rawwaye ko bhul sakein. Hame maaf karna aata hai, dosti karte hai to peeth per waar nahi karte hai (p. 17)."

Translation: "People like us (with physical conditions) have learned to have patience from a very young age. At every step of life, we have been deceived by so-called 'normal' people. This world is inhabited with both good and bad people, but bad ones are more than the good ones and we come in contact with them more often. They deceive us; they hurt us We get used to it over the time because we know that it is not just that we have to handle our disable condition; we also have to handle the mental fragility and greed of the normal people around us. We learn to laugh it away by accepting it as our destiny, so that we can forget the absurd and ruthless behavior of normal people. (We are very forgiving; we make friends and never deceive them.)"- Abu Bakr

The above lines are perhaps the most searing philosophical insight in the entire novella. It examines multiple dimensions of disability, embodied pain, emotional endurance, metaphorical silence, social prejudice, and moral clarity into a single, devastating confession.

Abu Bakr's imposed silence is both real and metaphorical; his silence hides profound complexities with various sociological and psychological factors affecting it. Leveraging insights from Miranda Fricker, people with disability or a medical condition cannot express or communicate their suffering because society lacks the words or frameworks to understand or decode them. She calls it a "hermeneutic injustice', where their voices are silenced, preventing them from being heard and recognized (Fricker, 2007).

Abu Bakr speaks of inherited patience; a condition imposed upon disabled individuals from birth. He is not simply describing personal temperament; he is articulating a structural reality. Borrowing from Davis's concept of the "hegemony of normalcy" echoes directly here: our society is designed in a way that requires disabled subjects to cultivate endurance simply to exist. Patience accompanied by silence becomes not a virtue, but a survival strategy (Davis, 1995).

The line, "Qadam-qadam par hamare sath aise waqeyaat hotey hain ki ham inke aadi ho jatey hain," reveals a learned tolerance of injustice. Borrowing from Garland-Thomson's (2009) observations about how differently abled bodies are constantly relegated to indignities that are normalized through repetition by an act of naturalization of discourses (Thomson, 2009). These 'small incidents' of discrimination and prejudice against disabled individuals are actually the daily humiliating reality of the people living with a disabling condition. The concept also goes with the disability scholar Professor McRuer's notion of 'micro-aggression' hurled towards people with differently abled bodies by the normal people (Ruer, 2003).

In the line "normal logon ki zahni mazoori aur lalaach," Abu Bakr subverts the hierarchy of normal and abnormal. According to him, people with "normal" bodies are emotionally and ethically more fragile, abnormal, greedy, selfish, and impatient. The subversion aligns with Siebers' (2008) provocative notion that disability deconstructs not weakness but the moral failings of ableist societies.

The line, "Ham hans kar… let it go…", Abu Bakr describes the emotional strain disabled people in-act to pacify the discomfort of others. This connects powerfully to Wendell's (1996) idea of the "rejected body," where disabled individuals must constantly navigate, manage, and compensate for social cruelty.

The line spoken by Abu Bakr, "Hame maaf karna aata hai; dosti karte hain to peeth par waar nahi karte hain." (We know how to forgive; and we also know how to take care of friendship; we do not ditch our friends) is a moral claim, not a sentimental one. Abu Bakr portrays impaired people as ethically superior, with integrity that the so-called "normal" culture lacks. This moral clarity is consistent with Kafer's vision of disabled futurity, which is based on values such as trust, loyalty, and relational care rather than cure (Kafer,2013).

Thus, the quotation serves as a fundamental indictment of ableism (structural prejudice), capitalism (greed), the ethics of modern relationships (betrayal), and the emotional cost of survival (forced patience).

The narrative reframes disability not as a moral failing or a fault, but as a site of philosophical richness and ethical strength. Abu Bakr's poignant contemplation provides a counter-narrative, where disability is not a lack, but embody wisdom, endurance, honesty, resilience and empathy that challenges the very definition of "normal."

"Duniya ka almiya khudgarz hona nahi, behis hona hai (p. 07)."

Translation: "The tragedy of the world is not being selfish, but the deliberate indifference to the pain of others."

When Abu Bakr speaks about the emotional state of modern urban life. His perspective corresponds with Garland-Thomson's theory that the disabled body is not only gazed upon but frequently rendered invisible through indifference. Not only it is cruel to disable someone, but also to refuse to see, hear, or acknowledge them (Thomson, 2009).

When Tulip paper comes in to bring his voice back to life, the story becomes almost too personal. Hameed creates a place here, where digital mediation, enchantment, and human vulnerability all come together. The Tulip paper does not merely "speak for" Abu Bakr; it conveys the unarticulated, the inaudible, the profoundly

internalized, a feat unattainable by any medical device or application. This corresponds with Kafer's (2013) critique of "curative time," which posits that disabled futures are frequently envisioned solely through medical recovery. Tulip, on the other hand, sees a future where voice and agency move through mystical and relational channels.

The role of the Tulip paper makes it harder to be too optimistic about technology. According to Wajcman's (2004) feminist theory of technology, its operation is based on ethics rather than efficiency. Technology is not impartial; it reacts solely when Alizah's intentions are genuine rather than avaricious. Hameed uses this magical digital object to question not only disability but also the moral economy of technology.

III. GENDER DYNAMICS

Alizah's intersecting narrative in Tulip provides the emotional and moral core of the story and also adds a layer of complexity. Her aspirations to make a career in the city of New York, her daily struggles for mundane things, her fractured self-confidence, and her constant desire to escape poverty and social mobility align with what Nancy Fraser (1997) identifies as the gendered terrain of neoliberal precarity, where women disproportionately shoulder economic instability, emotional labor, and moral responsibility. Alizah is neither emotional nor sentimentalized; she comes to New York with certain dreams from Chicago, but she falls short of her dream while negotiating survival in a harsh urban space that demands resilience while offering little financial security. Her vulnerability exists alongside intense ambition, and her aspiration for a better life is shaped as much by deprivation as by imagination.

Hameed created a complex and well-rounded character with contradicting traits. Alizah is greedy, selfish at times yet generous, rude yet deeply empathetic, and practical yet idealistic. These paradoxes do not weaken her character; rather, they make her truly human and real. Her early engagement with the Tulip paper reflects not only moral failure but exhaustion, the fatigue produced by sustained material scarcity. Her constant attempts to extract money from the mystical Tulip paper, sketching dollars, luxury goods, cosmetics, dresses, shoes, and accessories, operate as symbolic expressions of classed and gendered desire. These designs are not trivial illusions; they are visual testimonials of a life devoid of economic stability, when consumption is envisioned as a pathway to dignity and security.

Alizah is the only communication bridge between the internal thoughts of Abu Bakr and the outside world through the mystical tulip paper. Alizah becomes the trans locutor of Abu Bakr's inner world and his suppressed consciousness and also emerges as the only hope for Abu Bakr's terrible condition, the conduit through which speech, recognition, and agency re-enter the world. Hameed's deliberate attempt to relegate this task to a young woman highlights an important feminist insight: women are frequently forced to undertake unseen emotional, interpretive, and ethical labor within social systems that deny them structural power. Tulip, however, politicizes this labor rather than naturalizing it. Also, Hameed tries to problematize the performative gender roles by placing Alizah at the centre of all the action that happened in the narrative (Butler, 1990). Alizah's mediation is not passive caregiving but rather an active, morally laden practice that alters the conditions under which communication is possible.

At the same time, the Tulip paper is extremely gender neutral. While Alizah performs the gendered task of care and mediation, the magical object that facilitates communication is neither associated with femininity nor masculinity. Instead, the Tulip paper serves as an ethical mediator, responding to intention rather than identity. Its silence when Alizah asks material favours and response when she acts with empathy demonstrate a moral logic that transcends gender. In this way, the Tulip paper serves as a link between interiority and exteriority, voice and silence, and kindness and avarice, while remaining independent of any gendered care economy.

Alizah's initial agreement to assist Abu Bakr is contingent upon his mother's monetary offer, resulting in a suspension of the Tulip paper's functionality. The refusal represents a narrative intervention that highlights the limitations of commodified care. The Tulip paper asserts that under a capitalist system defined by interactions involving transactions, transactions motivated by greed cannot facilitate constructive transformation. This event underscores a fundamental feminist critique: caregiving loses its ethical significance when reduced to an exchange value. Alizah's discontent with the Tulip paper's "saintly" nature is a harsh reality reveals the tension between survival needs and moral responsibilities that defines gendered precarity within capitalism (Hameed, 2012).

While helping Abu Bakr as a communication conduit, she organically developed a bond with him; she first felt the experience of living with a physically disabled individual in close proximity. She felt for Abu Bakr, and despite all her resistance not to help him and the challenges that came up while helping him, she began to act beyond logical reasoning and confronted his deceitful friend, recovered his stolen diary from his fellow scholar, and accepted responsibility without expecting anything in return, not even material gain. Drawing insights from Alison Kafer, the notion of crip futurity illuminates this transformation. Kafer argues that futures for disabled lives should not be taken care of through treatment, productivity, or economic success only, but

through relationality, care, and shared vulnerability (Kafer 2013). Alizah's empathetic behavior reflects this vision. She imagines a future shaped not by material wealth but by ethical commitment and mutual recognition. She feels that change in herself too, which she beautifully articulates in the following excerpt:

"Kisi goongey ke sath rehne ka yeh mera pehla tajurba hai; Isiliye sab kuch badla-badla; Yani ajeeb-o ghareeb…. Oh… yani samajh se balatar lag raha hai (p. 13)."

Translation: "This is the first time I am having the experience of living with a mute individual, so it is a kind of different experience altogether; which is strange and myriad…oh…. it is beyond my normal understanding, the known knowledge systems."

Alizah's unconditional and ethical support for Abu Bakr is not solely an outcome of her sentimentality and sacrifice. It is risky, confrontational, and emotionally demanding. Leveraging insights from Susan Wendell's feminist ethic of care, it is active rather than nurturing, and disruptive rather than soothing (Wendell, 1996). She does not only help Abu Bakr by taking risks, confronting strangers, and arguing with people. By doing so, she not only challenges exploitation and deceitfulness but also enforces justice for him. She reconstructs her own moral compass, exploring a form of self-worth not totally dependent on material wealth and social validation.

The character of gypsy woman makes the narrative layered and it further complicates the gendered dynamic to the story. The medium of communication between Abu Bakr and Alizah is tulip paper, which she got from a gypsy woman while delivering pizza to her door. The gypsy woman gave Tulip to Alizah when it stopped working for her. She said that she has healed many sick people with the help of Tulip, but now its validity is over with her, so she is handing it to Alizah with a clear warning that "Not every magical thing leads you to treasure and riches (p. 04)."

"Not every magical object can perform magic. Sometimes it can only do mundane tasks. The task as a translator. A voice of a voiceless. A friend who helps in need (p. 12)."

The above excerpt from the novella spoken by the gypsy woman is a strong critique; in fact, she has become the mouthpiece of the author, that not every magical object can perform magic (material objects and desires); the real magic lies in helping others, being sensitive to surroundings, and becoming a voice for the voiceless, which she calls mundane tasks. Maybe there was never an existence of a mystical tulip paper in the story; it may be just an imagined object, employed by Hameed deliberately

She very optimistically put up that "the people whose desires are being fulfilled completely are not the fortunate ones, but the people with half-filled desires, longing for more, are more fortunate in their lives (p. 03)."

Desire, in Tulip, is not condemned; it must be disciplined. Despite possessing magical qualities, the mystical tulip does not aim to please people or acquire wealth and material gain; it also does not directly assist by arranging medical aid for Abu Bakr or providing easy money, but instead creates circumstances that enable Abu Bakr to regain what he lost: his dignity and aspirations.

Gender is performative and complex in Tulip through Alizah's social activism, gypsy woman's philosophical wisdom, and the Tulip paper being gender neutral. Gender is not reduced to just a biological category but arises as an ethical position shaped by social injustice and moral probation. Caregiving ethics are feminized within the social world of the narrative, but the principles that sustain care—empathy, restraint, and responsibility—are not gendered. By highlighting this divide, Hameed restores political relevance to labor and reconciliation behaviours that are sometimes disregarded as commonplace or feminine.

Alizah's transformation challenges conventional notions of the self. In Tulip, autonomy is derived not solely from power, financial resources, or verbal authority; it arises through active listening, collaboration, and ethical perseverance. The principles of the Tulip paper, which are gender-neutral, alongside Alizah's gendered efforts, demonstrate that change occurs through accountability rather than authority. The novella presents a significant assertion: that intentional care can serve as a potent form of resistance.

IV. CLASS, POLITICAL ECONOMY, AND URBAN PRECARITY

There is a constant mention of class, status, and social mobility in the novel. Both the protagonists and the other characters reflect economic precarity and financial dependence. All of them need wealth and social mobility to come out of their circumstances. Alizah's constant pertinence is that she belongs to a poor class and wants to be rich with the help of tulip paper or some magic. She always aims to possess a decent living in New York; buying luxury goods, branded products, and cars are all reflective of her attitude towards life. She wanted to be quick rich all the time, and although she is hardworking too, as she has been earning her living by doing a number of menial jobs. That's why she got ready to help Abu Bakr so that she could make quick money.

Abu Bakr badly needs money to get his tongue surgery done so that his ability of speech can be restored.

"I have been in discussion with a highly esteemed surgeon who is prepared to perform a procedure on my tongue. The surgeon is very optimistic about the success of this surgery, which will ultimately restore my ability to speak. I require a significant amount of money to cover the cost of the surgery, but unfortunately, I am currently lacking the necessary funds. I can't wait indefinitely for government assistance to arrive." (p. 19)

Abu Bakr's reflection illustrates his predicament and the dire need of funds for the much-needed surgery. Drawing insights from Iyer et al., the excerpt highlights the difficulties that people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds encounter, when trying to access essential healthcare services. The statement brings attention to the inequity in healthcare outcomes between different social classes (Iyer et al., 2008). Borrowing from Kevin Fiscella's insights, the statement highlights challenges when depending solely on government assistance, emphasizing the need to avoid prolonged waiting time; it also highlights that government aids can be slow and bureaucratic, often lacking coverage for specialized medical procedures (Fiscella, 2004).

Hameed's critique of consumerism and desire is articulated most sharply through the omniscient narrator's reflection:

"Insanon ki zururatein itni nahi hoti jitni khwahishein. Insaan ko zururat nahi, khwahish beraham banati hai." (p. 14)

Translation: "Human beings have fewer needs compared to their seemingly endless desires. It is not our need but rather our infinite wishes that make us ruthless." (p. 14)

This observation strikes at the ethical core of the novel's political economy. The line exposes how unchecked desire, particularly the desire for luxury, speed, and excess, fuels insensitivity toward suffering bodies. It is not poverty alone that marginalizes individuals like Abu Bakr, but a social order driven by accumulation and competition, where empathy becomes expendable. Alizah's early fixation on wealth and material security is thus framed not as moral failure but as a learned response to precarity. Over time, however, her engagement with Abu Bakr and the ethical discipline imposed by the Tulip paper enable her to distinguish between survival needs and destructive desires.

The following excerpt from the novella is a reflection that how social stratification magnifies the effects of greed. The relentless pursuit of wealth can encourage can encourage dishonest trade practices that widen the gaps between rich and rest of the society. Drawing on Piff et al.'s work, the unethical actions driven by self-interest can heighten economic inequalities in society. Policymaker's greed can have an effect on social welfare initiatives. To compound existing class divisions, greed can fuel opposition to redistributive programmes (Piff, 2012)

"In this world, there is greater prevalence of avarice than poverty. While poverty can potentially be eliminated, the insatiable greed of individuals remains an ongoing challenge." (p. 06)

This philosophical insight is justified by the actions of the characters in Tulip: Faraaz, Abu Bakr's friend, borrowed money from him and did not return it; Taylor, his university scholar, stole Abu Bakr's manuscript; and initially, Alizah too got ready to work for materialistic favours to help Abu Bakr.

The novella is a profound reflection that how class structures affect vulnerability, ambition, and survival in a world where capitalism is ubiquitous. Alizah's economic hardships and Abu Bakr's financial reliance due to his medical condition illustrate the inequity in distribution of resources and acknowledgment that characterizes urban modernity. Borrowing insights from Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital—economic, social, and cultural—provides an essential framework for understanding their distinct yet interconnected trajectories (Bourdieu, 1986). Alizah does not have a stable job or support from institutions, but she does have a kind of resilience and social intuition that she has built up over years of doing independent jobs. Abu Bakr possesses cultural capital, including education, literacy, and intellectual ambition; however, his differently-abled body severely limits his social mobility within an ableist, productivity-oriented capitalist social structure. The inequity is more foregrounded if the said condition is looked through Nancy Fraser's (1997) model of redistribution and recognition. Both characters experience material deprivation; Alizah faces unstable employment and housing insecurity in an urban space, while Abu Bakr contends with medical expenses and economic dependency subsequent to his accident. But their lack is made worse by being misunderstood. Disability, ethnicity, religion, and class converge to erode Abu Bakr's social legitimacy, whereas Alizah's working-class status renders her labor imperceptible and expendable. The novel illustrates that economic injustice is inextricably linked to cultural devaluation; material deprivation and symbolic exclusion function concurrently to create marginalized existences.

Urban spaces, New York and Chicago are not just spaces in the novella. Drawing insights from Achille Mbembe (2001), the concept of " modern precarity", places where some bodies are persistently at risk of being marginalized, unsafe, and the systemic erosion by the inequalities surrounded them (Mbembe, 2001). These spaces offer mobility, opportunity, and technological progress, but for characters such as Alizah and Abu Bakr, they result in fatigue, alienation, and emotional isolation. The paradox of late modernity is evident: unparalleled connectivity exists alongside profound indifference, and abundance coexists with acute vulnerability.

In this political and economic environment, magical realism serves as a form of resistance rather than a means of escape. Leveraging insights from Stephen Slemon's (1995) magical realism serves as a counter-hegemonic discourse is especially pertinent in this context. The Tulip paper does not fit with capitalist dreams of

getting rich quickly or climb the social ladder. It won't make money, luxury, or physical comfort. Instead, it gets involved at the level of dignity and relationships (Slemon, 1995).

The Tulip paper's saintly resistance to greed reinforces this distinction. The opening line of the novella, "Life is mystic (full of surprises) and we are its magic" (p. 01), echoes that magic like ethics lies within ourselves, our humanity, compassion, empathy rather than over abundance and greed. What sustains life in Tulip is not the fulfilment of every wish but the novella foregrounded the significance of connection, trust, and ethical responsibility. In this sense, Hameed reimagines political economy through a moral lens, proposing that true wealth lies not in accumulation but in empathetic care and mutual recognition.

Tulip provides a nuanced and significant critique of global capitalism by emphasizing class conflict, consumer demand, and urban precarity. It illustrates how marginalized individuals has to navigate through a society that prioritizes expedience over mindfulness and financial gains over empathy. The novella, through its distinctive fusion of magical realism and political economy, asserts that survival can serve as an act of resistance, and that restored dignity possesses a transforming force surpassing monetary wealth.

V. SPACE, URBAN MODERNIITY, AND MARGINALITY

In Tulip, space is not just an architecture; it is socially produced, complex, and deeply political. The New York street where Alizah and Abu Bakr first collide accidentally is not merely a vehicle for narrative action but the epicenter from which the entire narrative unfolds. The momentary collision, seemingly accidental and insignificant, invokes the novella's moral, emotional, and magical trajectory. Hameed thus transforms an ordinary urban street into a site of narrative ignition.

Utilizing Henri Lefebvre's (1991) idea of spatial creation is especially pertinent in this context. Lefebvre asserts that space is not a vacant vessel for the unfolding of life; rather, it is perpetually generated by social interactions, power dynamics, and quotidian practices (Lefebvre, 1991). The New York street in Tulip exemplifies this: it is shaped by speed, anonymity, and capitalist circulation, yet it becomes re-signified through the encounter between two marginalized bodies. When Alizah's mobile phone slips into Abu Bakr's pocket, the street produces a new social relation, one that disrupts the city's habitual indifference.

This disruption corresponds with Michel de Certeau's (1984) conceptualization of urban walking as a mode of lived spatial experience. De Certeau differentiates between the conceptualized, abstract city and the city as perceived by everyday individuals through mobility, serendipity, and spontaneity (Certeau, 1984). Alizah and Abu Bakr do not "occupy" the city from positions of power; they move through it, vulnerable to accidents, collisions, and erasures. Their meeting is a product of this lived urban randomness, revealing how meaning emerges not from architectural design but from human encounters.

The symbolic weight of the street intensifies when the Tulip paper becomes operational for the first time. When Alizah later sees the image of her lost phone appearing on the mystical paper, enchantment erupts not in a private or fantastical realm but directly from the urban encounter. This moment is crucial: Tulip situates magic within modernity rather than outside it. The street becomes the threshold where the digital (mobile phone), the magical (Tulip paper), and the human (disabled consciousness) converge. In this sense, the street functions as what Chanady (1985) calls a zone of coexistence, where multiple realities operate simultaneously without cancelling one another.

The street functions as a contact zone of cultural multiplicity—a space where bodies of different ethnicities, religions, languages, and histories move side by side, often in close physical proximity yet with little genuine connection. Abu Bakr, a Pakistani Muslim man with a speech disability, occupies a position of layered marginality within this space. He remains socially invisible, although he is born and brought up in the city, a condition that resonates with Achille Mbembe's (2001) account of urban precarity, where certain lives are rendered isolated or unrecognizable within the structures of modern power (Mbembe, 2001).

Alizah, too, moves through the city as a vulnerable subject. Her presence on the street is shaped by class vulnerability rather than privilege; she navigates the city as a worker struggling to survive, not as a consumer enjoying its abundance. Their encounter on the street can be seen as a convergence of different yet intersecting marginalities, demonstrating that exclusion in urban modernity is not singular but relational.

Doreen Massey's conception of space as relational and constantly in an act of becoming further illuminates this encounter. Space is formed through interactions, trajectories, and narratives that intersect at particular moments. The New York street significantly becomes such a space: a temporary collection and interactions of trajectories that alters the future paths of both Alizah and Abu Bakr. The street does not merely host their meeting; it actively reshapes their lives (Massey, 2005).

The significance of the spaces becomes clearer when contrasted with other sites in the novella. Hospitals signify bodily vulnerability; Alizah's basement room signifies economic constraint; Abu Bakr's inner world, accessible through the Tulip paper, signifies silenced consciousness. The street, however, is the only space where all these dimensions momentarily intersect. It is public yet intimate, chaotic yet transformative.

Later, when Alizah herself experiences vulnerability on the street and is helped by an elderly woman, the city reveals another dimension; its capacity for unexpected empathy. This moment complicates the narrative of urban alienation, suggesting that even within structures of indifference, ethical gestures can emerge. The city thus becomes a paradoxical character: isolating yet connective, brutal yet capable of care.

The Tulip paper's trans-spatial movement from the gypsy woman to Alizah, from Alizah to Abu Bakr, from street to home to hospital, mirrors the circulation of marginalized stories across urban space. These stories are usually drowned out by the noise and speed of city life. Through the magical object, however, the city is forced to witness what it typically ignores: disability, silence, endurance, and moral resilience.

The New York street functions as the novella's ethical and narrative axis. It exposes the violence of modern inattentiveness while simultaneously offering the possibility of encounter, recognition, and care. Hameed's intervention lies in transforming an ordinary urban space into a site of awakening; demonstrating that within the anonymity of global cities, a single accidental collision can reconfigure lives, voices, and futures.

VI. CONCLUSION

Tulip is a novella, that thinks deeply about bodies, wounded bodies, disabled bodies, poor bodies, ambitious bodies, and the fragile social and emotional infrastructures that sustain them. By centering Abu Bakr's interior monologue, accessible only through a magical–digital interface, the novel decisively shifts disabled consciousness from the margins to the core of narrative attention. His reflections articulate what Lennard J. Davis (2013) identifies as the cultural production of ableism, while simultaneously responding to Tobin Siebers's call for a reimagining of disability as an embodied, ethical, and political condition rather than a personal deficit (Siebers, 2008).

Alizah's transformation, grounded in feminist ethics, offers a parallel yet intersecting narrative of survival. Her journey reflects Alison Kafer's vision of political futures shaped not by cure, perfection, or economic success, but by relationality, care, and shared vulnerability. As a working-class woman navigating urban precarity, Alizah embodies the gendered labour of mediation, listening, and ethical decision-making (Kafer, 2013). Her gradual shift from transactional desire to moral responsibility reveals that hope itself can function as a political force, not loud or revolutionary, but persistent, deliberate, and quietly resistant to systems that devalue human difference.

The novel's most significant intervention lies in its deployment of digitized magical realism. By merging magical realism with everyday digital technology, Hameed reimagines the relationship between voice, technology, and resistance. The Tulip paper does not operate as a tool of miracle or material transformation; it refuses wealth, productivity, and excess. Instead, it functions as an ethical mediator, facilitating connection only when desire is disciplined by empathy. In doing so, it challenges both capitalist fantasies of limitless fulfilment and ableist narratives that equate value with productivity or speech.

Importantly, the Tulip paper does not change the world in spectacular ways, in fact it does not actually performs any magic; it stops functioning for materialistic gains and quick profits and aligns with the opening line of the novella, "Life is mystical and we are its magic". It does not dismantle structural inequality or erase suffering. What it does instead is far more intimate and politically and socially resonant: it restores Abu Bakr's authorship, retrieves his stolen narrative, and enables him to reclaim agency through storytelling. At the same time, it transforms Alizah, allowing her to recognize that dignity and purpose do not emerge from accumulation, but from responsibility and ethical choice.

Also, the novella is a social critique of the contemporary culture, where the lack of empathetic connection, human indifference, and desire for excess material gains preside everywhere. The phrase, logon ki zahni mazoori (people's mental and emotional fragility) is resonant throughout the narrative.

By placing a magical, inanimate object to the centre of the narrative, Tulip insists that enchantment is not opposed to reality but embedded within it. The novel suggests that resistance does not always announce itself through grand gestures; it often unfolds through small acts of care, moments of listening, and the refusal to abandon one another in a world structured by speed, greed, and indifference.

Tulip offers a compelling ethical vision for contemporary times. In a social landscape where efficiency eclipses empathy and desire overwhelm restraint, the novel reminds us that magic survives in the fragile spaces between people, in unspoken thoughts given voice, and in the quiet resilience of those who continue to hope despite systemic neglect. Through its nuanced engagement with disability, gender, class, and technology, Tulip emerges as a powerful meditation on what it means to be human in a world that often forgets how to listen.

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