

Magical Realism: Growth and Development

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Magical realism is more a literary mode than a distinguishable genre and it aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites such as time and timelessness, life and death, dream and reality and the pre-colonial past and the post-industrial present. It is characterized by two conflicting perspectives. While accepting the rational view of reality, it also considers the supernatural as a part of reality. The setting in a magical realist text is a normal world with authentic human characters. It is not at all fantastic or unreal; it is a mode of narration that discovers the natural in the supernatural and supernatural in the natural. It is a mode in which the real and the fantastic and the natural and the supernatural are more or less equivalently and coherently represented.

The term “magical realism” was first used by Novalis, the German poet and philosopher in 1798 to refer to a “true prophet” or an “isolated being” who cannot be bound by ordinary human limitations. According to Novalis, this prophet should be referred to as a “magical idealist” or a ‘magical realist’.¹ He talks about the miraculous truth that is the quintessence of contemporary magical realism.

Novalis’ concept of “magical realism” could not be developed further. However, in 1925 the term was again used by Franz Roh, another German and an art critic, to refer to paintings that demonstrate an altered reality. With reference to magical realism he writes:

We recognize this world, although now - not only because we have emerged from a dream - we look on it with new eyes . . . (Zamora and Faris 17-18)

Roh continues, “This calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces, means that the ground in which the most diverse ideas in the world can take root has been reconquered - albeit in new ways” (20). During the 1940s and the 1950s, the term “magical realism” was used to describe the unusual realism by American painters such as Ivan Albright, Paul Cadmus, George Tooker and some other artists.

The major figure in the conceptual genealogy of magical realism in the context of literature is Massimo Bontempelli, the Italian writer and critic. In 1926, he specifically names that art as “magical realism” which proposes to find miracles in the midst of ordinary day to day life. Some works by Kafka, Junger and Musil are later named as magical realist texts, though they were not appreciated as such at the time of their first publication. Bontempelli exerts an influence over both Alejo Carpentier and Miguel Angel Asturias, the two authors credited with the earliest works of Latin American magical realism.

Arturo Uslar-Pietri, the Venezuelan essayist and critic, applies the term “magical realism” to a very specific South American genre which is influenced by the blend of realism and fantasy as one comes across in Mario de Andrade's influential novel *Macunaima*. In 1948 Pietri defines magical realism as a poetical negation of reality. He

¹ See Warnes.

refers to “the depiction of man as an element of mystery surrounded by realistic data or a poetic intuition or denial of reality”.²

Alejo Carpentier, the Cuban writer, popularizes the trend by using the term “lo real maravilloso” or marvellous reality in “Preface to *The Kingdom of This World*” (1949). He writes:

Lo real maravilloso americano - The marvelous begins to be unmistakably marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle), from a privileged revelation of reality an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state. (Zamora and Faris 85-86)

The first sustained piece of literary criticism devoted to magical realism appears in 1955 when Angel Flores christens the term “magical realism” to describe a wide range of Latin American authors who share certain aesthetic similarities. Flores writes that in “magical realism we find the transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal”(114). He continues, “It is predominantly an art of surprises. Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality. Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision” (116). For Flores magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, or as he claims, “an amalgamation of realism and fantasy” (112).

In 1967 Luis Leal attempts to correct Flores’s overly formal definition. For Leal, “the principle thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances” (122). Leal further writes, “In magical realism key events have no logical or psychological explanation. The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality or to wound it but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things” (123).

The term gains currency by the Spanish American writings of Borges who sees man's search for meaning in this infinite universe as a fruitless effort. In the universe of energy, mass, and speed of light, Borges considers that the central riddle is time, not space. Borges is deeply influenced by Berkeley who argues on the nonexistence of any material substance in this universe and thinks that the sensible world consists only of ideas through which it is perceived.

Irlemar Chiampi, the Brazilian critic, is the first to develop a coherent narratological theory of magical realism in 1980. She emphasizes on magical realism’s idea of “naturalizacion de lo irreal” (28) that refers to the denaturalisation of the real or the naturalisation of the marvellous.

In 1985 Amaryll Chanady tries to distinguish magical realism from fantastic literature. She writes, “The magical realist text must display coherently developed codes of the natural and supernatural, the antinomy between these codes must be resolved, and a measure of authorial reticence must be in place to ensure that the co-existence and legitimacy of both codes is not threatened” (3-6).

The most elaborate critical anthology on magical realism appears in 1995 with the publication of *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson

² See “Arturo Uslar Pietri”.

Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. In this book Zamora says, “Magic realism’s most basic concern [is] – the nature and limits of the knowable. Magic realist texts ask us to look beyond the limits of the knowable” (498). Faris presents some new observations in magical realism as a literary mode in her book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* in 2004 where she counts magical realism as “perhaps the most important contemporary trend in international fiction” (1).

When we take the popular magical realist texts into account, Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915) is credited as a great work of magical realist fiction of the earlier period. Here the blend of the magical happenings with the day-to-day life is prominently visible. The novella begins with the protagonist’s overnight physical transformation into an insect. Kafka narrates, “One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug... His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumstance, flickered helplessly before his eyes.” (1)

Pietri uses the technique of magical realism earlier in his tale “Rain” (1928). His short fictions come later which influence many magical realist writers. Jorge Luis Borges becomes popular for his *Ficciones* (1944) whose tales of fantasy and dream-worlds are classics of the twentieth-century world literature. Most of Borges' tales embrace universal themes, such as, the theme of time. In the fictions of Borges, time is shown as a metaphor of life that often recurs in a circular labyrinth. This is a significant aspect of a magical realist work.

In the novel *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), Carpentier’s projection of a kind of heightened reality is shown through his presentation of the miraculous happenings as natural and unforced. In this novel Carpentier describes Mackandal, the slave who possesses many supernatural abilities. Carpentier writes, “With wings one day, spurs another, galloping or crawling, he had made himself master of the courses of the underground streams, the caverns of the seacoast, and the treetops, and now ruled the whole island” (42).

Carpentier uses “magical realism” as an art of writing long before it becomes fashionable. He depicts the contradictions between political reality and religious or mythical beliefs. *The Lost Steps* (1953) is a story told twice. The novel describes the search, the adventures, and the revival of the protagonist’s creative powers, and the remarkable decision he makes in a village that seems to be truly outside history. *The Chase* (1956) and *Explosion in a Cathedral* (1962) are the two other works of Carpentier's magical realist technique which have key influences on the writers of the Latin American “boom” that emerges in the 1960s. In *Explosion in a Cathedral*, Carpentier tries to express the world-view and belief-system of the Afro-Caribbean population through the technique of magical realism.

Gunter Grass, the German magical realist, becomes popular during this period with his remarkable work *The Tin Drum* (1959). Here Oscar, the protagonist has a scream of such awesome power that it shatters glass and can subdue all who hear it. He has the power to hear the unheard activities of insects, birds and animals.

Asturias attempted something similar by simultaneously creating and retelling history of the descendants of the Maya of Guatemala by blurring the distinction between reality and myth in *Men of Maize* (1967), the book which won him the Nobel Prize.

Later come Jacques Stephen Alexis, Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) marks itself as a brilliant work of magical realism. The book tells the story of the Buendia family in the fictional village of Macondo. It is a vivid story of one hundred years passed by seven generations with memorable characters who share almost the same names. It is about their heartbreaks, shattering of dreams and their rise and fall. Here we come across the incorporation of many supernatural things like levitation and flying carpets. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* intertwines the ordinary with the extraordinary and treats time in a timeless fluidity that exemplifies the characteristics of magical realism. Marquez becomes the master of this genre with the success of *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981), *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), *Of Love and Other Demons* (1994) and *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* (2004) etc.

Some important English American writers also emerge during this period. Vladimir Nabokov is known for *Pale Fire* (1962) and *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969); Thomas Pynchon for *V* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973); John Fowles for *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969); and Angela Carter for *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984).

Carter's *Nights at the Circus* combines the mythical with the realistic; characters have supernatural abilities; and time is hazy throughout the novel. For instance, Walser, the journalist hears the clock striking midnight three times within one night during his interview with Fevvers, the lady with the wings. "Walser was seriously discomposed. 'Hey, there! Didn't that clock strike midnight just a while ago?'" (42), he asks the lady and to his astonishment she denies it. Here, the actual time and the story time are mingled up, creating confusion between appearance and reality.

Isabel Allende is another powerful magical realist of this time. Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1979), *Of Love and Shadows* (1985), *Eva Luna* (1987) and *The Stories of Eva Luna* (1991) are distinguished magical realist texts. Her books are full of astonishing images and characters possessing magical qualities. For instance, in *The House of the Spirits*, one of the characters named Clara has supernatural abilities like levitating, communicating with the spirits, reading dreams and predicting future. The story tells about three generations of the Trueba family in a fictional place somewhere in Chile, like Macondo, the fictional place in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992) is a classic of magical realism with a distinctively African twist. The book takes the reader to an unnamed Third World city in the Nigerian landscape, the author's own native land.

Azaro, the main character as well as the narrator of this novel is an "abiku" or spirit child, who moves back and forth between the human and the spirit worlds. He breaks his promise to return to the spirit-world after being born as a human since he is fascinated towards his family and gets attached to his mother's affection.

His fellow spirits torment him because of his impoverished life in Africa. Here, Okri brings us the live Africa with all its complexities through the living and non-living characters. He denies the use of the supernatural as it is a part of reality for him. He says in an interview:

This is just the way the world is seen: the dead are not really dead, the ancestors are still part of the living community and there are innumerable gradations of reality, and so on. It's quite simple and straightforward. I'm treating it naturally.

It's a kind of realism, but a realism with many more dimensions. (Contemporary Authors 338)

Toni Morrison uses magic, folktales, and the supernatural in her novels *The Bluest Eye*(1970), *Song of Solomon*(1977) and *Beloved* (1987) etc. Some extra-sensory knowledge or perception is given to the characters of her novels. Their dreams are described as if they are happenings in real life and the characters accept visitations as real. Morrison's style combines such unrealistic elements with a realistic presentation of life and characters.

Although "magical realist" works vary from one another in their structure and presentation, one universal theme in them is the use of the fantastical to highlight and challenge the setting's paradigm of reality, rather than using it merely as a plot device. The detailed history of magical realism shows the unique fusion of beliefs and superstitions of the Hispanic conqueror and his Creole descendants and of the native people and the American slaves with the day-to-day lives resulting in a new perception of reality. The new discoveries and colonization of America brings forth new images of utopia and fantastic worlds among people which leave little difference between dreams and realities. This factor affects each and every area, mostly arts and literature. Story-telling tradition through fables and myths is re- introduced, fictional heroes are being popularized and fictions are mingled with facts.

Among the postcolonial magical realists, writers like Jorge Amado (*Shepherds of the Night* [1964]), Julio Cortazar (*Hopscotch* [1963], *Blow-Up: And Other Stories*[1968]), Italo Calvino (*Cosmicomics* [1965], *Invisible Cities* [1972]), Milan Kundera (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*[1979], *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* [1984]), Peter Carey (*Illywhacker* [1985]) and Alice Hoffman (*Illumination Night* [1987], *Turtle Moon*[1992], *Practical Magic* [1995] and *River King*[2000]) etc. are also instrumental in making the trend more popular.

Among others, the two names that have gained prominence as magical realist writers in the recent time are J. K. Rowling (seven books in *Harry Potter* series [1997-2007]) and Stephenie Meyer (four books in *Twilight* series [2005 – 2008]). Tea Obreht is one of the latest magical realist writers whose novel *The Tiger's Wife* (2011) has become immediate success and a best seller. It is about a doctor who unfolds the mystery behind her grandfather's death.

Some Indian writers also figure prominently as magical realists among whom Salman Rushdie is unique. His *The Satanic Verses* (1998) celebrates hybridity, impurity and intermingling. In this work, the reader comes across unexpected mingling of ideas, cultures, politics and human beings. The supernatural elements are consummately treated by him. His *Midnight's Children* (1995) takes the issue of the colonial version of the history of India. Here, he uses magical realism as a device to bind the Indian culture of the past to the contemporary multicultural interface. Rushdie's principal use of magical realism in the text involves the treatment of supernatural ability such as, the telepathic power of Saleem, the protagonist and of the other thousand and one children born at the stroke of midnight on 15 August 1947 (the date of India's independence). Rushdie enables them with this ability to communicate with each other at anytime and allows the supernatural, the mythical and the bizarre to intrude into the natural, the contemporary, and the real without explanation or rationalization. It results in an idiosyncratic, culturally and politically aware form of meta-fiction. Considering illusion as a part of reality, and acknowledging the hypnotic grip of the magic on human beings, Rushdie elaborately treats these issues.

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi's *The Last Song of Dusk* (2008) is like eavesdropping on a dream. The hybridity of eastern and western culture is visibly prominent in this novel. There is the combination of fantasy and fact, and magic and realism in Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay's *The Ghost of Gosain Bagan* (2008) which has been translated into English from the original Bengali by Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee. The fantasy-world of talking- ghosts such as Nidhiram and the nasal- tone- ghost along with dreams and fantastic sequences that the text re-invigorates also tell about the miserable condition of Burun, a child which is quite realistic.

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