

What is Magical Realism?

Showkat Hussain Dar
PhD Scholar
Department of English
Mewar University Rajasthan

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams provides the following definition of magic realism:

The term magic realism has been applied to the prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, as well as to the work of writers such as García Márquez in Colombia, Günter Grass in Germany, and John Fowles in England; they interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism with fantastic and dreamlike elements.

The definition of magic realism of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* is equally noteworthy:

Magic realism--a kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the 'reliable' tone of objective realistic report. Designating a tendency of the modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and draw upon the energies of fable, folk tale, and myth while maintaining a strong contemporary social relevance. The fantastic attributes given to characters in such novels--levitation, flight, telepathy, telekinesis--are among the means that magic realism adopts in order to encompass the often phantasmagoric political realities of the 20th century.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, one of the greatest Columbian novelists, offers an interesting definition on magical realism:

Realism is a kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive a vision of reality. However good or bad they may be, they are books which finish on the last page. Disproportion is part of

our reality too. Our reality is in itself all out of proportion. In other words, Garcia Marquez suggests that the magic text is, paradoxically, more realistic than the realist text.

Magical realism is an aesthetic style or a genre of fiction in which magical elements are blended seamlessly with a realistic atmosphere, usually to produce a deeper understanding for reality. The German art critic Franz Roh originated the term “magical realism” in a 1925 essay during a discussion about an emerging post-expressionistic painting style known as the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). With “magical realism”, Roh was referring to a style that depicts a mundane, realistic subject matter, but accentuated with strange and dreamlike qualities that allows one to re-evaluate “reality”. As a literary movement, magic realism was part of a larger cultural development in the mid-twentieth century among a group of Latin-American writers in the Caribbean, South America, and Mexico who contributed to the creation of an innovative approach to writing called "the new novel." Some generic aspects of the "new novel," as defined by Philip Swanson in his introduction to the anthology *Landmarks in Modern Latin American Fiction*, are interior monologues, multiple viewpoints, fragmented or circular narrative structures, and an overall distorted sense of reality. Thus, to understand the social, political, and cultural climate that engendered magical realist fiction, one must first view it as being a reaction to the narrative Realism that attempted to mimic reality. At the same time, "the new novel" arose as a response to the increasing understanding that Latin-American society was changing, particularly as it became increasingly urban and modernized by new technological innovations. Thus, many writers responded to these changing conditions by experimenting with new forms and genres that presented reality as ambiguous, complex, and disorganized rather than orderly and meaningful. This style of writing reached its zenith in the Boom period of Latin-American literature, a period from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, in which a number of extremely important works, most notably Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Cortazar's *Hopscotch* became internationally recognized.

As one literary development among many occurring at the time, magic realism focused on the fantastical elements of everyday life as found in imagined communities situated primarily in Latin America. Its specific influences are found in the surrealist movement in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s of which Asturias, Borges, and Carpentier, three early magic realist writers, were exposed to while studying in Europe. In fact, the first magic realist movement was centered in Europe, especially Germany and France where the major exponents of Surrealism were Franz Roh and Andre Breton, respectively. During the 1920s, these critics and their cohorts declared the "marvelous" not only an aesthetic category but a whole way of life. These critics influenced and learned from artists like Max Ernst, whose painting "Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale" brings together a random association of images to jar the viewer's conventional sense of what the contexts for the images should be. Ultimately, the work of Ernst, Joan Miro, Salvador Dali, and others, as well as the writings of Breton and other surrealist thinkers, sought to utterly confuse the distinctions between art, thought, ideas, and matter.

This interest in an ultimate union of all things was not shared by the first major proponents of magic realism in Latin America. This second movement, whose best known figures were Borges and Carpentier, both of whom lived as young men in Europe, borrowed from the surrealists' style and shared in their fascination with the fact that a banal everyday object could become magical simply by having extra attention called to it. But these writers practiced their versions of magic realism almost exclusively in narrative fiction rather than visual arts, and each had his philosophical difference with the European movement. Borges, a staunch philosophical idealist, rejected the attempt to unify all categories. Instead, he wrote stories and essays that consistently embraced the notion of an orderly universal realm of thought that was confused by a flawed (and utterly separate) world of matter. Carpentier also rejected the surrealists' attempt to impose the magical on everything. But in his rejection of surrealist unity, he went in the opposite direction from Borges. In his 1949 essay, "On the Marvelous Real in America", which was a prologue to his novel *The Kingdom of this World* Carpentier argues that the very material history of the Americas is essentially magical (or "marvelous," in his own terminology). Specifically for Carpentier, this magical element comes from the rich religious mixture, heavily invested in

magic, which manifests in Afro-Caribbean culture. This essay by Carpentier is considered a landmark because it is the first attempt to describe magical realism as uniquely Latin American. Thus, whereas Surrealism focused on dreams and the unconscious in creating new kinds of images and experimental writing styles through the juxtaposition of unrelated objects, both Asturias and Carpentier returned to their homelands in Latin America and infused their writing with mythic, historical, and geographical elements found in their local environments.

The historical and political currents that are often an indelible aspect of magic realist writing reflected a variety of social and political ills that were undergoing or had undergone at some prior time. More specifically, Latin America's history of conquest, slavery, imperial domination, and subsequent attempts to self-govern become the backdrop as well as the primary "raw" materials for many magic realist writers. For example, Carpentier in *The Kingdom of This World* focuses on the slave uprisings in Haiti, which occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Other writers, like Fuentes in *Where the Air Is Clear*, probe the issue of national identity in contemporary urban societies such as Mexico City or Havana. In Allende's and García Márquez's work, historical events of the recent past tend to appear as pivotal scenes. For example, American multinational companies' entrance into Latin America economies in the late nineteenth century resulted in exploitation, alienation, and sometimes death of workers. The consequences of U.S. economic imperialism is referred to in the massacre scene at the banana plantation in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in which hundreds of demonstrating workers are killed and thrown into the sea. This scene is based on the 1928 banana strike by United Fruit Company workers in Colombia, many of whom were gunned down by the army. Similarly, both *The House of the Spirits* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* reveal the rise of military dictatorships that created an endless succession of civil wars and political coups in countries like Colombia and Chile.

By contrast, a much-lauded event in Latin-American countries, where divisions between the rich and the poor were and still are extreme, was the socialist revolution in Cuba in 1960. The overthrow of a long-standing despot ushered in an optimistic era among socially minded Latin-

American artists and intellectuals who were fueled by the socialists' hopes for an egalitarian, classless, and safe society. Thus, despite the many atrocities that many magic realist works depict, the movement's adherents have often been seen as delivering a hopeful message, revealing at its roots a joyful engagement with life that is bound together with the utopian vision that destruction and violence will be overcome. It is my assertion that no discussion of magical realism would be complete without reference to the fantasy and surrealism.

In magical realism the world appears much like our own, but also includes an element of the extraordinary. Fantasy is very different. While magical realism situates readers in a predominantly realistic world, fantasy takes place in an unreal world with unreal characters. Fantasy creates different places and species, ones that exist outside of our world. While magical realism stays grounded in our own reality, fantasy breaks free of it.

Both surrealism and magic realism use a mixture of realism and fantastic elements. The main differences lay in the content itself. The objective of the Magic Realist is to bring us fresh presentation of the everyday world we live in. The artist may choose unusual points of view, mysterious juxtapositions or common objects presented in uncanny ways. However, everything we see is within the realm of the possible, although sometimes unlikely. Surrealism takes us to another world, one which is unreal and exists only in our mind. It presents the impossible, using both traditional and experimental artistic techniques, often shocking us.

There are several characteristics that distinguish magical realism from other forms of fiction:

1. **Fantastical elements:** As it is clear now from the aforementioned points, that magical realism is a mode of narrative where reality mingles with fantasy. Characters might be capable of magical feats that defy logic, or stumble upon fantastical occurrences that are unexplained. It is allegorical storytelling using the inexplicable, making observations of everyday reality with the extraordinary.
2. **Hybridity:** Magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to postcolonialism, with hybridity being a primary feature. Specifically, magical realism is

illustrated in the inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural and Western and indigenous. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing, and change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate.

3. **Authorial Reticence:** Authorial reticence refers to the lack of clear opinions about the accuracy of events and the credibility of the world views expressed by the characters in the text. This technique promotes acceptance in magical realism. In magical realism, the simple act of explaining the supernatural would eradicate its position of equality regarding a person's conventional view of reality. Because it would then be less valid, the supernatural world would be discarded as false testimony.
4. **Defamiliarisation:** Another device used by magical realists is defamiliarisation. As Shklovsky wrote: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.'"
5. **The Prevalence of Folklore:** Unlike their European counterparts, African novelists, justifiably incorporate folkloristic details like proverbs and mythological stories in their modern narratives. One cannot study African literatures without studying the particular cultures and cultures upon which African writes draw for their ideological and formal elements.
6. **Imagery:** Imagery is an essential device used in magic realist works since the attempt to create aspects of reality that are unfathomable relies on convincing images. Allende, García Márquez, Carpentier and Ben Okri use extensive description in their works, detailing the worlds they create with sensory images that communicate the mysteries of the natural world.

Traditionally magical realism fuses a realistic narrative with mythical one. However, in this paper we have seen that in the technique of magical realism there is not only fusion of realism and myth, but bold imagination, use of exaggeration and hyperbole, fantastical and metaphorical

elements, detailed description of uncanny events, and exploration of limited zones and continually transforming characters.

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