

Magic Realism in Manipuri Folktale *Ucheck Langmeitong*: A Narrative Study

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Abstract

This paper examines magic realism in the Manipuri folktale *Ucheck Langmeitong* through the theoretical perspectives of Ángel Flores and Wendy B. Faris. As a traditional *Phunga Wari* (hearth tale), the folktale blends everyday reality with supernatural elements in a way that makes the magical appear natural and believable. The study focuses on the transformation of the protagonist, Heiyainu, into a hornbill as a response to emotional suffering, neglect, and domestic violence. Rather than presenting this transformation as a fantastical event, the narrative treats it as a natural part of reality, reflecting a key feature of magic realism. Ultimately, the study argues that *Ucheck Langmeitong* demonstrates how Manipuri folklore uses magic realism to express trauma, cultural values, and social realities.

Keywords: magic realism, Manipur literature, folktale, supernatural, real, trauma

Introduction

Manipuri folklore is a part of the rich and dynamic cultural heritage of Manipur. It preserved the collective memory and indigenous beliefs and values through oral storytelling traditions such as folktales, myths and legends. Among these, folktales commonly known as *Phunga Wari* occupy a central place in the cultural and social life of Manipur. Traditionally narrated around the household hearth, these stories were shared orally across generations. The *phunga* (hearth) symbolized not only warmth and sustenance but also a space of intimacy, memory, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Through *Phunga Wari*, elders imparted moral values, social norms, and cultural beliefs, while also preserving myths, legends, and everyday experiences in narrative form. These tales often blur the boundaries between the real and the supernatural, where humans, animals, and spirits coexist and interact naturally. Transformation, magical events, and symbolic figures are not treated as extraordinary disruptions but as integral parts of lived reality. In this sense, Manipuri folktales anticipate what modern literary theory identifies as magic realism, presenting a worldview in which the magical is seamlessly embedded within the real.

Within this rich oral tradition, *Ucheck Langmeitong* stands out as a powerful example of *Phunga Wari*. The tale combines domestic life, emotional conflict, and cultural belief with transformation and symbolic meaning. The protagonist's metamorphosis into a hornbill does not read as a fantastical oddity; it emerges as an emotionally resonant and culturally intelligible response to suffering within the home. *Ucheck Langmeitong* not only inherits the conventions of *Phunga Wari*, it shows how such folktales work within a mode closely aligned

with magic realism, bringing reality, imagination, and cultural symbolism into a single, coherent narrative space.

Magic realism offers a useful lens for reading these stories. The term first appeared in art criticism when Franz Roh, in 1925, used *Magischer Realismus* to describe post-expressionist paintings that rendered ordinary objects with such clarity that the strange seemed to arise from reality itself. In literature, the concept was reimagined by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier as *lo real maravilloso*, “the marvellous real.” For Carpentier, Latin America’s history, culture, myth, and politics were so extraordinary that the marvelous belonged within reality rather than outside it. The mode became strongly associated with mid-twentieth-century Latin American fiction, especially in the work of Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende, where magical events unfold in everyday social settings. Critic Ángel Flores further framed magic realism as a form in which the ordinary and the extraordinary coexist without contradiction. Over time, the mode travelled well beyond Latin America, taking root in postcolonial and Indigenous literatures, where spiritual belief, myth, and daily life are inseparable. In the context of Manipuri folklore, especially in Phunga Wari, magic realism helps us understand tales like *Uchek Langmeitong*, where transformation, symbolism, and the interwoven lives of humans, animals, and spirits are part of narrative reality.

This paper argues that *Uchek Langmeitong* functions as a magic-realist narrative: transformation, the entanglement of human and animal worlds, and the hornbill’s symbolic force work together to translate trauma and expose gendered oppression within the domestic sphere. From a mytho-ecological perspective, the hornbill emerges as a culturally charged figure that re-enchants the world of the folktale. In this way, magic realism appears not merely as a literary technique, but as a culturally embedded mode that reflects the complexity of Manipuri storytelling and its power to represent emotional, social, and ecological realities.

Magic Realism in *Uchek Langmeitong*

The narrative structure of *Uchek Langmeitong* reflects the characteristics of magic realism as proposed by Ángel Flores and Wendy B. Faris. This tale with its seamless blending of realistic domestic experiences with supernatural transformation, constructs a world in which the magical is not separate from reality but deeply embedded within it. It offers emotional suffering, transformation, ecological symbolism, and spiritual interconnectedness in a way that naturalizes the extraordinary. As a result, *Uchek Langmeitong* becomes an important example of how Manipuri folklore anticipates and embodies the essential features of magic realism. According to Flores, magic realism is not something entirely imaginary or detached from reality; rather, it transforms reality with a blend of magical events that are accepted without surprise. This element is clearly visible in *Uchek Langmeitong*. The folktale is grounded in a realistic social setting centered on domestic life, family relationships, emotional conflict and patriarchal authority. But within this realistic framework, the transformation of Heiyainu into a hornbill (*Uchek Langmeitong*) occurs very naturally and without any narrative disruption. Neither the narrator nor the characters question the transformation or attempt to explain it rationally. .

The transformation of Heiyainu into a hornbill is one of the most significant magic realist moments in the folktale. Rather than functioning merely as fantasy or spectacle, the transformation emerges from emotional suffering and domestic violence by her stepmother.

“Heiyainu wept heavily without making any sound because of shame and endured the pain when she was scolded by mentioning the name of her deceased mother besides beating. Heiyainu requested, ‘My mother! Please beat me to the blue for my naughtiness. Don’t scold by mentioning the name of my dead mother.’ At this the step-mother slapped Heiyainu on the mouth for speaking to her and even when she bleed the mouth did not feel love for her.” (Bormani, 106)

In this story, Heiyainu is neglected with cruelty and emotional oppression by her stepmother after the death of her biological mother. The death or the absence of her biological mother intensifies the vulnerability of Heiyainu within her own patriarchal household. Her father, who is frequently away from home due to business responsibilities, remains physically and emotionally absent for much of the narrative. In his absence, patriarchal authority and domestic power are effectively transferred to the stepmother, who assumes control over the household as its acting head. This power shift enables the stepmother to exercise her authority. The household, therefore, becomes a place of hierarchical control where Heiyainu is left unprotected and isolated, unlike her stepbrother. In this context, transformation into a hornbill bird becomes a symbolic and psychological response to trauma. The magical event externalises emotional pain that cannot be easily expressed through ordinary language. This aligns with Flores’ understanding of magic realism as a mode which can reveal hidden dimensions of reality beyond rational perception.

The supernatural transformation into a hornbill bird is treated as an extension of lived reality rather than a departure from it. This treatment corresponds closely with Wendy B. Faris’ concept of “ordinary enchantment.” In *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Faris explains that magic realism creates a world where magical occurrences are narrated in a matter-of-fact manner and integrated into ordinary life. According to Faris, magic realism “remystifies” reality by revealing wonder within the everyday world itself. This theoretical perspective is particularly useful in understanding the tale *Uchek Langmeitong*, where the extraordinary transformation into a hornbill does not rupture reality but instead deepens it emotionally, spiritually, and symbolically.

Faris also identifies the merging of different realms of existence as a central feature of magic realism. In *Uchek Langmeitong*, the boundaries between human, animal, and spirit worlds remain fluid and permeable. The Heiyainu’s transformation into a hornbill does not erase human identity but reconfigures it within another form of existence. The folktale, therefore, reflects an animistic worldview commonly found in indigenous oral traditions, where nature is spiritually alive and interconnected with human experience. Also, the magical elements emerge organically from this cultural worldview rather than appearing artificially imposed upon reality. This shifting nature between life forms challenges rigid distinctions between the human and non-human worlds. Moreover, the hornbill is not merely an ordinary bird but a symbolic and spiritual figure carrying emotional memory and cultural significance. Through the hornbill, the folktale establishes continuity between personal suffering and the natural environment, in which nature becomes an active participant in the emotional structure rather than a passive background setting. Such interconnection reflects Faris’ argument that magic realism destabilises fixed categories and opens narrative space for multiple realities to coexist simultaneously.

Furthermore, the hornbill functions as a mytho-ecological symbol within the folktale. It has symbolic significance that extends beyond transformation itself to embody freedom,

resilience, memory, and survival. Heiyainu's shift into the natural world through transformation suggests liberation from domestic oppression while simultaneously preserving emotional continuity. The hornbill thus becomes a site where trauma and healing coexist. And the folktale re-enchants the natural world by presenting the bird not only as a creature of ecology but also as a carrier of spiritual and emotional meaning. Additionally, this ecological dimension of the narrative resonates strongly with Faris' concept of "remystification". Modern rationalist perspectives often separate humanity from nature, reducing the natural world to material existence alone. However, in *Uchek Langmeitong*, nature retains sacred, symbolic, and emotional depth. The magical transformation reconnects the human subject with the ecological world, suggesting a cosmology in which human life, animal existence, and spiritual presence remain fundamentally interconnected. The folktale thereby preserves indigenous modes of perceiving reality that resist purely rational or material interpretations of existence.

The domestic setting of the folktale also contributes significantly to its magic realist structure. Unlike high fantasy narratives that unfold in distant imaginary worlds, *Uchek Langmeitong* is rooted in ordinary family life and recognisable social realities. Here, the household becomes a site of emotional conflict, jealousy, and power struggles. The stepmother figure represents not merely personal cruelty but the broader operation of patriarchal domestic authority in the absence of her father. Heiyainu's suffering emerges from everyday structures of emotional neglect and hierarchical power rather than from supernatural evil. By embedding magical transformation within this realistic domestic environment, the folktale exemplifies the magic realist tendency to reveal extraordinary dimensions within ordinary social realities.

The folktale further intensifies the exploration of gendered oppression and emotional violence as the narrative reflects anxieties surrounding the replacement of the dead mother by the "new wife," creating tensions of jealousy, displacement, and insecurity within the household. The stepmother's authority is exercised through emotional cruelty, exposing the vulnerability of the child within patriarchal family structures. Yet the folktale does not articulate this critique through direct political language. Instead, it encodes emotional and social tensions symbolically through transformation and mythic imagery. Therefore, magic realism becomes an indirect but powerful mode of social critique.

Another important aspect of Flores' theory is the proto-modernistic quality of magic realism. Flores argues that magic realism anticipates modern literary experimentation by combining realism with psychological and symbolic depth. *Uchek Langmeitong* demonstrates this complexity through its layered treatment of trauma, memory, and identity. The folktale moves beyond simple moral instruction and enters a psychologically charged narrative space where emotional suffering becomes intertwined with symbolic transformation. Heiyainu's metamorphosis into a hornbill can be interpreted simultaneously as cultural myth, psychological expression, ecological symbolism, and spiritual continuation, while its matter-of-fact narration also aligns with Faris's description of the magical and the ordinary coexisting within the same narrative world. In this way, *Uchek Langmeitong* demonstrates the narrative richness often associated with magic realism.

The folktale's oral storytelling structure also contributes to its magic realist quality. As part of the *Phunga Wari* tradition, the narrative emerges from communal storytelling practices where myth, memory, spirituality, and lived experience naturally coexist. The oral

mode allows the magical and the real to remain intertwined without contradiction. Events that may appear impossible within rationalist frameworks become culturally coherent within the worldview of the folktale. Thus, the narrative does not attempt to distinguish sharply between realism and imagination because both operate simultaneously within the cultural consciousness of the community.

Through the theoretical frameworks of Ángel Flores and Wendy B. Faris, *Uchek Langmeitong* can therefore be understood as a powerful example of magic realism rooted in Manipuri folklore. The folktale naturalizes the supernatural, dissolves boundaries between human and non-human worlds, and reveals extraordinary dimensions within ordinary domestic life. Transformation becomes a response to trauma, the hornbill becomes a mytho-ecological symbol, and emotional suffering becomes intertwined with spiritual and cultural meaning. In doing so, the narrative demonstrates how indigenous oral traditions can embody sophisticated literary modes long before their formal theoretical articulation in modern literary criticism.

Conclusion

Uchek Langmeitong exemplifies magic realism not as a decorative fantasy but as a culturally grounded epistemology in which suffering, nature, and spirit cohere without rupture. Read through Ángel Flores and Wendy B. Faris, the tale shows how the magical events, such as Heiyainu's metamorphosis into a hornbill, arise organically from ordinary domestic life and are narrated with a matter-of-fact tone, thus "remystifying" the everyday. The transformation functions as a multilayered sign of a psychological externalisation of trauma, a critique of patriarchal domestic power, an affirmation of animistic continuity between human and nonhuman worlds, and a mytho-ecological emblem of memory, resilience, and survival. The story's oral, communal frame further normalises permeability between realms, refusing rigid separations of realism and the marvellous.

Significantly, the folktale foreshadows the modernist narrative experimentation that Flores links to magic realism in that it maintains multiple registers at the same time, including social, psychological, ecological, and spiritual, without favouring any sequence of explanation. In doing so, *Uchek Langmeitong* demonstrates how indigenous storytelling traditions of Manipur prefigure and enrich the theoretical vocabulary of magic realism, as they naturalise the supernatural, ingrain social critique in symbolic form, and re-enchant the world by revealing wonder as integral to everyday, domestic reality.

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