

MPRA

Munich Personal RePEc Archive

Magical Realism: Locating its Contours in Postmodern Literature

Stephen, Nevil

St. Paul's College, Kalamassery, Ernakulam, India

2015

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/72636/>
MPRA Paper No. 72636, posted 24 Jul 2016 06:24 UTC

Magical Realism: Locating its Contours in Postmodern Literature

Nevil Stephen S.

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English,
St. Paul's College, Kalamassery

nevilstephens@gmail.com

Ph:09447892702

The emergence and popularity conjured up by the literary sensibility (magical realism) in the postmodern literary milieu implicitly signals yet another milestone in the ongoing globalizing process in literature. Magical realism as a mode, style and politics widened its latitude in a world characterized by alteration, enduring change and uncertainty. This literary mode being a unique mix of discursive heterogeneity succeeded in capturing reality in alternate ways and from multiple perspectives. This paper primarily attempts in locating its contours in the postcolonial literature and its effectiveness in representing reality that is heterogeneous hybrid.

Key words: Magical Realism, postcolonial, heterogeneity, alternative

The year 2015 and incidentally the month April is of greater significance in the postmodern/postcolonial literary history as this time period recorded the demise of German Nobel laureate Gunter Grass and also the first death anniversary of yet another Nobel Prize winner, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. These two men of letters have something in common as they both identified and capitalized in their literary works the fictional device and artistic mode: magical realism.

The rise of this literary sensibility (magical realism) and the considerable popularity enjoyed by it in the postmodern literary world implicitly signals yet another milestone that is the globalization of literature. In a vanquished and subsumed traditional world, magical realism entered as a discursive heterogeneity to form one among the top rugs in the ladder towards modernism. It demarcates a fluid boundary between postmodernism and postcolonialism. Aligning with the other emergent modernist art traditions, magical realism rejected the

nineteenth century positivism and the predicament of art on science and empiricism. Conversely, it ushered the readers to a magical world of folklore, mysticism and mythology.

Conceptualization of magical realism from a theoretical stand point is intriguing and complex as many writers have adopted the style and adapted them to their varying literary-political needs across borders. From a true postmodern standpoint, it is hardly totalizing or absolutist. Not in simple terms could it be reduced as a genre that simply mixes the supernatural and the natural, the magical and the real, the determinate and the ambiguous. Instead the style provides the space for multiplicity, hybridity and heterogeneity. While at one level it could be seen as a modernized extension of the veteran literary genre: the romance, on the other level it could be seen as a decolonized space that visiblizes dehierarchization and plurality in postcolonial discourse.

In this context it is fundamental to read through some of the perspectives conjured up and practiced by literary theorists. While Maggie Ann Bowers sees magical realism as a narrative mode that provides “a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy, expressed in many postcolonial and non-Western works of contemporary fiction,” (1) Stephen Slemon views it as “a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems” (410).

Locating magical realism from a literary view point reveals two discourses at work, the magical and the real. However, these two are never asymmetrical, but sustainably extend tension as well as resistance between them. Magic never becomes improbable in the magical realist text, instead emerges normative and normalizing within the realistic matrix. The real and the magic are synthesized in such a manner that the element of magic organically spring out of the reality portrayed.

Magical realism when positioned within the literary history reveals it as a literary genre that modified the artistic traditions of the 19th century realism of Flaubert and George Eliot. While realism premises itself on empirically verifiable evidences, magical realism integrates conflicting perceptions and realistic elements in a magical atmosphere. It in fact provides the writers latitude to disclose ideas that would remain undisclosed in realistic fiction as the indeterminate and indefinable events are empirically unverifiable in magical realism. Put

it differently, it is an alternate mode of openly yet subtly presenting more than what could be directly recorded, through syncretizing mythology, reality, fantasy and history.

Magical realism easily grabs attention of the readers as it operates in a real world with stories that remain familiar and credible to readers. The critic Angel Flores writes:

The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent literature from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to super natural realms. The narrative proceeds in well-prepared increasingly intense steps, which ultimately may lead to one great ambiguity or confusion” (104)

Magical realism if seen from a different plane is also potentially connected with the postcolonial thought. While the post colonialists consider realism as a hegemonic representation of the colonizer, magical realism provides scope for a powerful decolonizing project to imagine alternate histories. It offers voice to the marginalized and visibility to the non-canonical texts. Eurocentric cultural norms privilege formal realism that is characterized by rational thought and logical rendering rather than mysterious and fantastic. Magical realism then emerges as a regional alternative and subversion to the Western construction of the world. It potentially subverts the assumptions and conventionalities of the European realism and privileges the juxtaposition of objective and subjective realities.

Stephen Slemon while relating magical realism with postcolonialism sees it as a weapon of the “silenced, marginalised, disposed voices” in their fight against “inherited notions of imperial history” (342). Slemon sees it as a powerful device to address the socio-political issues using a non-imperial narrative tradition and thereby establish a sense of identity.

In a similar perspective, Wendy B. Faris, another critic observes magical realist texts as those written in reaction to the totalitarian regimes. She writes:

In magical realism, the focalization - the perspective from which events are presented- is indeterminate; the kinds of perceptions it presents are indefinable and the origins of those perceptions are unlocatable. That indeterminacy results from the fact that magical realism includes two conflicting kinds of perception that perceive two

different kinds of event: magical events and images not normally reported to the reader of realistic fiction because they are not empirically verifiable, and verifiable (if not always ordinary) ones that are realism's characteristic domain. Thus magical realism modifies the conventions of realism based in empirical evidence, incorporating other kinds of perception. In other words, the narrative is "defocalized" because it seems to come from two radically different perspectives at once. (43)

In the magical realist text, the binaries between the foreign and native, cosmopolitan and local, Western and non-Western are blurred. Paradoxically, most of the magical realist writers intentionally picture a come up against the imbalanced West and East necessitating an interbreeding of modern literary tradition with one or plurality of pre-modern, pre-scientific and pre-literate narrative traditions. This further implicitly brings forth a fusion of Western and non-Western cultures, modern and pre-modern manner of living in a carnivalesque narrative setting.

Magical realism as a mode, style and politics profit much in a world characterized by alteration, enduring change and uncertainty. Fredric Jameson and Perry Anderson connect the development of capitalism with the rise of magical realism. Jameson suggests that "magic realism depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of pre-capitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features" (as quoted in Cooper 16). Most of the magical realist writers paint in their texts societies that are heterogeneous, cultures that are under transition and populations that are hybrid and fluid. Postcolonial writers draw special effects from magical realists in their efforts to express a fissured and fragmented world, distorted and culturally displaced.

Now to add a historical glimpse of the evolution of the term *Magical Realism*, it was coined in the early 20th century to describe a neo-realist, post expressionist style of painting in Germany that later turned to be one of the popular artistic trends in international fiction especially in the postcolonial societies. The term was first introduced by the German art historian Franz Roh through a German phrase *Magischer Realismus* (meaning 'a counter-movement') who applied the term to the paintings which he studied to show how everyday familiar objects could be perceived unfamiliar and fantastic. It received acceptance in the Italian art circles through Massimo Bontempelli. A few artists who associated themselves early

in this defamiliarizing art movement include Carl Franz Radziwill, Otto Dix and George Grosz. Notably, this art-literary expression ‘magical realism’ spread world across with the translation of Roh’s book *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europaischen Malerei* (“Post-Expressionisms, Magical Realisms: Problem of the Newest European Painting”) in 1925. However, a significant role played in disseminating the term in the academia is Angel Flores with the publication of his 1955 essay titled “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction.”

Since 1960s the style gained currency in both Europe and America and frequently the term came to be largely associated with the works of South American authors such as Borges, Carpentier, Asturias, Cortazar, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and others. Due to diverse cultural and political issues that crowded Latin American countries between 1930 and 1945, magic realism found a fertile ground there and developed in equally different ways. So from a different paradigm, magical realism was a strong reaction against the cultural and political commotion of the age that illustrated over signification of European Expressionism, ramifications of the First World War, the political turmoil and the widespread revolutionary fervor that were worthy of attention during the period. However, it is inappropriate to confer magical realism as particularly Latin American phenomenon as the same frame has influenced many writers across geographic boundaries. Writers like Salman Rushdie used this “technique to open up new opportunities, varieties and wonders as metaphors from the issues they focus on” which includes the celebration of issues such as plurality, identity crisis, multiculturalism and hope for a new nation. (342)

Wendy B. Faris while locating the factors that typify the rubric of magical realist texts observes five primary factors such as (i) “irreducible element” of magic, (ii) detailing of a strong presence of the phenomenal world, (iii) reader’s unsettling doubts in reconciling to contradictory understanding of events, (iv) merging of different realms in the narrative and (v) disturbance of the received ideas about time, space and identity (7). Tomo Virk supplements these characteristics with a few more factors based on the works of Kafka, Grass and Nabokov which include (i) critique of Eurocentric discourse, (ii) incorporation of mythology, (iii) diverse time lines and (iv) alternative perspectives on history. (as quoted in Mrak 2-3)

Two decades prior to the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), sophisticated readers viewed magical realism from the framework of a Latin American affair following Alejo Carpentier. But with Marquez's text, many writers North American, Anglophone and Francophone were persuaded to experiment with this fictional practice. Some of the popular texts under this genre include: Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). At this point it would be an injustice to ignore some of the important Latin American developers and practitioners of magical realist tradition such as the Guatemalan novelist and poet Miguel Angel Asturias, Argentine short-story writer and essayist Jorge Luis Borges, Argentine novelist and short storywriter Julio Cortazar, Mexican author Elena Garro, Cuban novelist and essayist Alejo Carpentier, Chilean novelist Isabel Allende and indeed the Columbian novelist Garcia Marquez.

To round up, magical realism being a discursive heterogeneity succeeded in capturing reality in alternate ways and from multiple perspectives; the known and unknown, visible and invisible, rational through focal shifts, word plays, repetition, organic mingling of the real and the fantastic thereby aiming to privilege the marginalized narrative traditions. With an imaginative efflorescence, relying on orality and with an authorial reticence and ironic distance, it voiced the silenced 'other', visibilised the invisible, offered alternate representations of history and transgressed the ontological asymmetrical boundaries thereby opening up a decolonized space.

Works Cited

Abdullah, Md. Abu Shahid. "Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: Connection between Magical Realism and Postcolonial Issues." *International Journal of English and Education* 3.4 (2014): 341-350. Web. 15 Feb 2015.

Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magic(al) Realism*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print

Cooper, Brenda. *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a third eye*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.

- Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2004. Print.
- Flores, Angel. "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction." In: Zamora, Louis Parkinson and Wendy B. Faris (Eds.) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995. Print
- Mrak, Anja. "Trauma and Memory in Magical Realism: Eden Robinson's Monkey Beach as Trauma Narrative." *Politics of Memory* 2.3 (2013) 1-15. Web. 15 Feb 2015.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse." In Zamora and W. B. Faris (Eds.) *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham N.C.: Duke UP, 1995. Print.