

Magical Realism in Postcolonial Texts and Contexts: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

In the 1920s, magical realism was used as a critical mode of narration in artworks. In the second half of the twentieth century, the postcolonial authors and critics used it as a narrative strategy to present realities in a fascinating manner as opposed to that of the realist tradition in fiction. In particular, fictional writings from the margins employed it to explicate political, cultural and historical realities in the postcolonial contexts. The narratives reiterate realist narrative conventions subversively to present an alternative notion of reality to the western notions of objective reality. By subverting the notion of objective reality, magical realism critiques effects on colonization as a decolonizing device to examine the political, cultural and historical realities of the colonized. In this process of decolonization, magical realism gives impetus to counter the belief system of the colonizer through magical and mythical elements. It constructs metaphors to examine the contemporary world and reality. While employing metaphorical and biological allusions, the postcolonial authors attempt to regain their glorious past and assert their cultural identity. For a comparative study, three texts have been selected for analysis. These texts written during the 1970s, 80s and 90s represent three different continents: Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude belongs to Columbia in Latin America, Rushdie's Midnight's Children to India in Asia and Okri's The Famished Road to Nigeria in Africa. Relevant issues and events pertaining to the presence of European colonists in the non-western world resonate a blend of the real and the magical.

Keywords: magical realism, decolonization, independence, myth and metaphors, and postcolonial context

Introduction/Background

Originating in Europe, magical realism has become a prominent narrative device in fiction writing since the 1920s. In the narrative mode of magical realism, novelists after the mid-twentieth century started presenting realities of the colonized world after their independence from the European empires. Authors from the margin have explored this mode of writing to reinforce truths in narratives of power relationships between the imperial west and the colonized non-west. Magical realism, blending the real and the fantastic, has served as a powerful means of expression to regain the lost dignity and identity beyond the European colonial cultural space, especially in the formerly colonized countries by providing the oppressed a voice and a literary space for political and cultural criticism. Against this backdrop, this study examines the use of magical realism as an approach to analyze three postcolonial novels: Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) from the former colonies in Latin America, South Asia, and West Africa respectively. These novels propose alternative realities in the postcolonial contexts to unravel and reinterpret the official version of history in the former colonies of the western world.

This study argues that magical realism appraises the political and cultural realities of the colonized countries presented in the postcolonial texts and contexts. To substantiate the process of making things apparent, Anne C. Hegerfeldt reasserts that the authors adopt this mode to articulate their views and thoughts when they struggle "to express the inexpressible" (184). Protagonists, including Jose Arcadio Buendia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, and Azaro in *The Famished Road*, representatives of the former colonies of Europe, perpetuate their real-life experience in order to champion freedom, cherish independence, and reclaim what has been lost.

Statement of the Problem

Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Okri's *The Famished Road* employ magical realism as a strategic tool to present their political mission both at personal and national levels. Critiquing the conventional mode of the socio-political reality of their society, they assume that the worldviews presented so far and the discourses that explain their societies are incomplete in themselves. The study primarily explores the function of magical realist mode in discursive practices in discourses in human sciences. Furthermore, the study utilizes magical realism as a narrative device to analyze issues and events in the selected novels. Major characters in these fictional texts, in their attempts to experience the real world, recognize their true identities in myths and metaphors impeccable from their worldviews which they have previously inculcated in colonial political perceptions. What is intriguing about these characters is the way they perpetuate their real-life experience, crossing existing political, geographical, and cultural boundaries, beyond the ken of ordinary people's everyday experiences. This study departs from the existing scholarship on the realistic tradition of representation of the history of the colonial past in the conceptual frame of magical realism.

Research Questions

The study considers myths and metaphors strategically operated in the selected texts that blend rational and irrational strategically. Some pertinent research questions that surface in these novels are as follows:

- Why do these narratives employ magical realism as their strategic tool to serve their motives?
- In what ways do these selected narratives critique the politics of the postcolonial nations through magical realism?
- How are the characters' identities and faiths represented in these narratives in relation to magical realism?

Objectives of the Study

The current study tries to explore how magical realism critiques the effects of colonization as a decolonizing device to examine the political, cultural and historical realities of the colonized. The major objectives of this study are to:

- examine the employment of magical realism as the strategic tool to serve the motives of the authors;
- explore the ways of critiquing political history in the selected narratives through magical realism;
- analyze representations of reconstruction of identities of the characters and their faith to the cultural world in relation to magical realism.

The study has drawn on magical realism for the close reading of the selected narratives, considering it an appropriate perspective to examine the representations of political and cultural realities in the colonized world.

Methodology

The study unravels an exegesis of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Midnight's Children* and *The Famished Road*. In the study, I have examined postcolonial texts and contexts from Colombia, India and Nigeria. The method of this study is the textual interpretation and analysis keeping in view the primary texts through the essential theoretical works on postcolonialism and the magical realist discourse. Postcolonialism has been utilized as a theoretical lens and magical realism as a narrative strategy to critique impositions on the native political history of the concerned postcolonial nations and interpret socio-political contexts and characters' motives to live outside the colonial regime. Juxtaposing the fantastic and the mundane to subvert social injustice, political violence, and cultural hegemony, I analyze myths and metaphors and explore political and cultural realities in these fictional texts to critique the same. These narratives focus on a straightforward agenda of writing back to the empire through conscious decolonization to reassert their cultural identity. As qualitative research, this study also has made the critical reviews of the data that are beyond the quantification: the values and perceptions, imaginative speculations, and literary representations of national political history in the form of fiction and unfolds relationships between the real and the fantastic, bringing together the personal and the political.

Delimitations of the Study

In this study, three postcolonial texts, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Midnight's Children*, and *The Famished Road*, from three continents with diverse cultures, traditions, and worldviews have been chosen for interpretation and analysis.

They have remained indispensable for this study since they represent the magical realist traditions from the respective regions. They also employ magical realism in response to certain common issues which, in spite of their dissimilarities, place them in the same cultural space to give voice to the disempowered. This study is divided into six chapters. The first chapter familiarizes and problematizes the area, rationale and issues of magical realism in postcolonial novels. The second chapter reviews previous scholarships about magical realism, and critical reviews of the selected narratives and establishes the relevance of this critical inquiry. The third, fourth and fifth chapters present an application of magical realism as a political critique for analysis of the selected narratives. The concluding chapter critiques the contemporary political and historical realities of their own nations investigating how Marquez, Rushdie, and Okri have utilized magical realism to present their views through the narratives.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

The critical debate on the postcolonial world after the 1960s becomes the primary concern of this study for two reasons. First, such a survey helps locate issues in critical intellectual debate. Secondly, the study identifies critical receptions to issues and concepts of magical realism within the theoretical frame of postcolonialism. Latin American critics like Franz Roh, Alejo Carpentier, and Angel Flores explore magical realism as a new trend in Latin American fiction and some propositions have indeed left their traces in the contemporary theories of the mode. Flores scrutinizes magical realism as the combination of realism and fantasy in a rich narrative with "logical precision" (112). The narration of historical accounts projects the real in a unique fashion after blending the real and the fantastic. Most of the critics agree upon such a fusion of the real and the fantastic to articulate the true nature of human relations underneath the postcolonial political ideology.

Magical realism reveals the mysterious side of human life, which lies in cultural realities. The presence of mythical and magical elements is a normal occurrence in the magical realist discourse. Wendy B. Faris succinctly points out the presence of ghosts in the magical realist texts arguing that "ghosts . . . or people, who seem ghostly, resemble two-sided mirrors, situated between the two worlds of life and death, and hence they serve to enlarge that space of intersection where magically real fictions exist" (178). The real, supernatural, and mystery pave a solid ground for the literary imagination of magical realism.

The fantastic and daily activities of life cover a proper space to explore the inner values and attitudes of the native people. Magical realism, thus, unravels the belief system of the natives in their indigenous cultural space outside the colonial adulteration.

Edna Aizenberg critically reviews Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to uncover a historical perspective "to reveal the absent history: those Third World conditions and exigencies that link postcolonial fiction and a desire to think historically" (1236).

Aizenberg holds the belief that new historicism challenges the official readings of history in these works, manipulating the discourse of the marvelous is understood as an act intended to reproduce, puncture and overcome the unreality imposed by the colonialist enterprise.

Shirley Chew describes Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* as a text that focuses on hybridity as a major trope. She thinks that the novel contains multiple voices with multiple perspectives. It is a kind of encounter between the East and the West, as Chew evaluates the personal and political history of postcolonial India. Chew finds Rushdie's strategy of history writing thought-provoking. She believes that Rushdie foregrounds multiplicity to question the Western modes of historiography.

Renato Oliva studies Okri's *The Famished Road* on Yeatsian and Jungian psychoanalytical perspectives. He highlights the importance of dreams and the collective unconscious in a logical and abstract way. Rather than being a naive conduit of cultural modalities and perspectives, Okri's magical realist text is a carefully contrived and manipulated work of art.

After thorough reviews of postcolonialism, magical realism, and the primary texts, the present study explores the dynamics of magical realism in the selected postcolonial texts and contexts. As a theoretical approach of postcolonial studies to respond to the texts, the literary device of magical realism, in an attempt to critique the politics and reaffirm the identity of the culturally marginalized people with diverse voices, endows reconsideration of the official colonial political history. This research utilizes ideas from the following theorists: Stephen Slemon's "resistance to colonialism," Wendy B. Faris's "questioning the colonial subjugation," and Christopher Warnes's "urge to reclaim," and "recover and affirm identities." The narratives in the magical realist texts from different continents: Latin America, South Asia, and West Africa are explored in the framework of such a structure in the postcolonial contexts.

Interpretation and Analysis

As an inventive platform for newer strategies, literature has always remained at the core of fighting against the ills of society. Magical realism has appeared as one of the strategies to review the national and regional ethos. As a narrative strategy, Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and Okri's *The Famished Road* adopt magical realism as a mode of cultural representation to critique impositions on the native political histories of their respective countries. By amplifying the voice of the marginalized, the novelists manipulate magical realism to tell their own stories, to reinterpret the established versions of history written from the dominant perspective, and to reinvent their own version of history and identity.

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Marquez parallels the fictional Macondo with the biblical Eden in the mythic space. Macondo's first interaction with the outside world comes from a group of traveling gypsies. The exposition of the novel reads like the narration of biblical Eden where everything is in the ideal and perfect form. The narrator describes, "The world was so recent that everything lacked names, and to indicate them, it was necessary to point" (1). The setting Macondo has been interpreted as the microcosm of a larger world, Latin America itself.

Marquez glorifies the life of the inhabitants of Macondo, comparing it with the biblical Eden. The place, the people and their activities in Macondo resemble the Edenic biblical setting. Deliberately reconstructing the mythopoetic space, Marquez's narrator transports characters beyond the real world of colonial Colombia. At this point, Marquez reconstructs the Edenic city of Macondo where two cousins – José Arcadio Buendía and Ursula – are united through a mythical symbiosis, thereby founding the ill-fated Buendía dynasty. The Buendía dynasty turns out to be an 'ill-fated Buendía Dynasty' only in the last phase of Macondo. The life of the first generation Buendía, the deeds of José Arcadio Buendía and Ursula Iguarán have been compared with the lifestyle of Adam and Eve in heaven. Both Edens, the Eden in Bible and the Eden in the novel were created with a purpose: the purpose of the fall. Macondo was created for the manifestation of fall to give asymbolic significance for the fall of Latin America.

Marquez furnishes a forte for blending the everyday with the miraculous, the historical with the fabulous and the real with the surreal flights of fancy. Raymond Williams argues that the narrative looks like "a book of fantasy but it is one of the most historical books and abounds in social and political implications" (96). By using magical realism as a looking glass into the thoughts and beliefs, Marquez gives a literary voice and re-imagines the world and its reality to the Latin American culture, politics and society of the 1960s. He represents the Latin American past by chronicling imaginary and emblematic families as a "form and product of violence . . . exploration of a broken history and an inchoate identity" (Aizenberg 1239). Marquez employs magic realism as a mode of narration from history and politics to address war, suffering and death with clarity and political slant grounded in the political history of Latin America from a critical perspective. Through magic realism, he conveys a unique reality of Latin America caught between modernity and pre-industrialization that incorporates magic, superstition, religion and history, which are unquestionably infused into the world.

The use of magical realism has helped Marquez replace fact with fiction. Thus, the end of Macondo and the Buendía family symbolically suggests the end of traditional power mechanism in the wake of the consciousness in the native people, the consciousness which was passed to Aureliano Babilonia by José Arcadio Segundo as it is stated in the novel, "Always remember that there were more than three thousand and that they were thrown into the sea" (359). It is the internalization of a native about the exploitations and atrocities done to his people.

Rushdie, in *Midnight's Children*, subverts the political history of modern India by blending the realistic and the magical. The novel chronicles the history of postcolonial India from the narrator Saleem's perspective, employing magical realism from 1917 to 1977. The 1001 midnight's children with a multitude of abilities and shortcomings represent an emerging nation India in the aftermath of the decolonization of the sub-continent from European imperial powers. Under the British Empire in the region, India was profoundly influenced by the idiosyncrasies of the foreign rule. The novel presents an encyclopedic investigation of an entire society through the story of a single person.

Rushdie aptly employs magical realism as a strategy to expose Saleem's struggle for identity after independence. The personification of the fortunes and losses of the country in Saleem remains a sublime quality in the narrative. Stephen Slemon takes magical realism as a subversive narrative mode "to present the postcolonial context from both the colonized people [the magical] and the colonizers' perspectives [realism] through its narrative structure as well as its themes" (qtd. in Bowers 97). Rushdie delineates the story of the birth of a nation after centuries of repression that uses a careful blend of magical realism and acute symbolization gracefully. As the country faces wars, political vicissitudes, and inner tumult, Saleem's life undergoes similar postcolonial experiences.

Rushdie writes at a moment when the new historical ideas are undermining previously recorded historical facts, tying an individual narrative to a larger historical one. The novelist employs Saleem to provide a different viewpoint on history, linking Saleem's own tale to that of his country, demonstrating a narcissistic approach to the narrative. The novelist also deconstructs the traditional notions of history, proposing a plethora of histories made out of a 'chutnified' mix of recollection and recorded facts as, "reality and truth are not quantifiable and not ascertainable. They are constructs of imagination and experience, and of language" (Srivastava 65). According to Srivastava, the novelist criticizes the political events of modern India, assessing from 1915 to 1970s.

As Rushdie's narrative strategy, the narrative inextricably binds the birth, fate, and identity of the infant Saleem as the narrator-protagonist of the narrative, with that of his modern country India. Although Rushdie maps the political history of India by intertwining the magical and the real-world views, the political history is not presented as a linear narrative in the logical patterns of cause and effect. He captures, re-imagines, and recounts the birth and coming of age of a man and a nation simultaneously in fragments. By fusing the fantastic and the mundane, he portrays the vast canvas, weaving several strands together in the epic narrative technique. His experimental narrative uses several figures of speech to rewrite and re-imagine India's modern political history. By using the technique of fictionalizing history, Rushdie attacks the political history of post-independent India. Rushdie valorizes pluralism, democracy, hybridity, and change. He presents a mosaic view of the nation and many places, using his own memory. Rushdie fuses the magical and mythical narratives to connect the protagonist's personal to political.

Okri's *The Famished Road* investigates the identity politics in the Yoruba African myth in the postcolonial Nigerian context. Azaro's sudden and involuntary shifts from the realistic world to the mythical serve to dismantle historical time in the mind of the reader. Ato Quayson clarifies:

Throughout all these myriad of events, no specific time indices are given. All the time indices are vague references to "that night", "the next morning", "during the time" and so on. Subsequently, the narrative makes concessions to temporality by referring to a sequence of days such as "Saturday" and "Sunday" as a frame for the occurrence of certain events. It is clear that the narrative imposes a framework of temporality on the narrated events rather reluctantly, for, as it progresses temporal indices become less and less prominent. (128)

Okri makes his intention to question received ideas about time, space and identity very explicit as he opens the novel with a mythic statement: "In the beginning there was a river" (3). Quayson indicates "Yoruba oral culture as a set of "indigenous conceptual resources" (9). He reads Okri's work as "the spirit world remains a vital life operating between the arena of real events" (133). Wright believes that Okri's writing echoes multidimensional reality apart from magic realism.

Through his narrator, he uses myths and metaphors in the pre-colonial West African Yoruba mythology to unfold his native country. In other words, he presents both the political and spiritual realities of post-independent Nigeria after colonialism, using myth and magical in the Yoruba cosmology. He offers hope to these poverty-stricken masses as well as urges them to rise against the corrupt politicians, the business community, and landlords who are responsible for their predicament in order to end the status quo.

Okri's narrative sets on the eve of the independence of Nigeria narrated from the perspective of Azaro, an abiku child. Literally, an abiku is a spirit child who is destined to die in infancy and be reborn to the same mother over and over again. In the abiku myth, the cycle of life comprised of birth, death, and rebirth resonates with the cosmic experience. The abiku people in their ritual offerings live beyond this mundane world in the shared belief system of rebirth in the cosmic space. In the novel, Okri's narrator unravels the abiku people's desire to live outside this real world: "with passionate ritual offerings, our parents always tried to induce us to live. They also tried to get us to reveal where we had hidden the spirit tokens that bound us to the other world" (5). These children live in the physical world of Nigeria, which has been ravaged by Western imperial power. It accepts the fact that colonialism really pushes the Nigerian world almost to its extinction through cultural disintegration and fragmentation. Ade's announcement equally indicates the need to restore indigenous cultural values. It emerges as the only way to fight back the hazards of colonization and its aftermath for its survival. It is the only way to make their country strong.

The Afrocentric and mythopoetic worldview promotes Okri as a postcolonial author who wants to rewrite the political history of Nigeria. Okri challenges the hegemonic Western worldviews and tries to create space for marginalized experiences and worldviews. He is basically concerned with the devastating impacts of colonialism and colonial aftermath on the native people and their culture. He aspires to bring the indigenous culture into the limelight. The socio-political chaos, corruption, and cultural fragmentation are the characteristics of the recently decolonized spaces. Okri uses various remarkable magical realist strategies to demonstrate them.

Major Findings and Conclusions

Conditioned by their cultural and political contexts, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, and Ben Okri have subverted and invoked colonial history to give voices to the oppressed allowing them to tell their own stories. Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and Okri's *The Famished Road* represent the social, political, and cultural issues of the Colombian, Indian and Nigerian citizens respectively after their independence from former European colonialism. A comparison of these three novels from three different geographic locations and cultural spaces unfolds a definite literary transition from realistic to magical realist fictional discourse. Whereas realism unpacks the disillusionment of colonial masses and the excesses of the ruling elites, magical realism consigns with the disillusionment of postcolonial masses and the excesses of the ruling elites who replaced the colonizers after independence. The transition from realism to magical realism was compelled by changes in cultural and political contexts.

These authors exploit myths and metaphors to transcend the social and political realities of the European imperial period. Using literary devices, such as symbols, metaphors, myths, and magical, these authors resolve the ruler-ruled power relations of the colonial period. The study focuses on how the protagonists' communities evolve and how the outside world influences them, as well as how the authors use magical elements to create broader commentaries on how politics and societies in the former colonies had been strangled by various colonial strains. The texts attempt to establish alternative realities through the juxtaposition of fantastical elements with equally mind-boggling realities. Precisely, the truth becomes fantasy, and the fantasy becomes truth.

Faced with the destruction of Columbia, India and Nigeria by colonization, these authors have resorted to magical realism as a tool to glorify the traditional cultural past, depicting the clash between traditional indigenous and colonial cultures, condemning the European subjugation and demanding independence of these continents in general and respective countries in particular. In conclusion, many magical realist texts draw their magical from the indigenous myths of the area in which the narrative is set. For instance, Marquez uses Catholic and pre-catholic Indian supernatural beliefs as his sources of magical, Rushdie borrows from Indian mythology, and Okri weaves the West African slaves' beliefs such as shape shifting into his narratives.

Contribution to knowledge

Postcolonial authors like Marquez, Rushdie and Okri focus on the agenda of writing back to the empire through conscious decolonization of the English language. Regardless of their specific political agendas, these magical realist texts born out of the context of cultural crises reassert cultural identity through myth, metaphor, and narrative. They employ magical realism as a local, everyday site of resistance that allows the respective postcolonial subjects to deflect and redirect the imperial gaze back at the West. This substantiates the study's major claim in critiquing the postcolonial politics of the nations and reconstruction of the history of the marginalized in the postcolonial cultural context. In sum, Marquez, Rushdie and Okri, who hail from different geographical, cultural, and political locations, share much in terms of treatment of their magical realism as reflected in their works. The present study intends to unfold the magical elements in the select texts to see why the authors use the retelling and adaptation of their respective traditional stories in the postcolonial contexts to express political critique. With this objective, this research intends to establish the relevance of this study, a departure from past works related to magical realism.

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