Magic Realism and Postcolonialism

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Abstract

Magic realism or magical realism bears an antithetical aspect. Magic and realism are two different aspects. But these two different aspects are mingled conjuringly to bring a dramatic effect or charm. These two aspects juxtapose and appear in the aesthetic scenario. It is a genre of narrative fiction and more broadly art that while encompassing a range of subtly different concepts, expresses a primarily realistic view of the real world while also adding or revealing magical elements. Magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to postcolonialism, with hybridity being a primary feature. In well known works written by Latin Americans, the message is often one of resentment towards the colonization that took place in the time of their ancestors. So it gives a jerk to the postcolonial sentiments.

Keywords : Magic, Realism, Postcolonialism, Hybridity

Full Paper

Although the term "magic realism" has been in use for over 60 years, there appears to be little critical consensus concerning its definition. While "realism" itself is a chronically unstable term, realist writing is usually understood to be that which draws on a set of narrative conventions designed to create the illusion that the story on the page is "real" or "true" and corresponds in some direct way to the ordinary world of day-to-day life. The term "magic" is equally contentious, arousing on the one hand, notions of harmless trickery and good-luck charms, and on the other, images of the supernatural and the fantastic. The oxymoron "magic realism" thus represents a complex and problematical critical concept.

The term "magic realism" first appeared in the context of art, being coined by the German art critic Franz Roh to describe the work of post-Expressionist artists in the mid-1920s. Roh claimed that these artists were painting ordinary objects through "wonderstruck eyes" seeing in such objects a "magical" re-creation of the world. These magic realist painters looked at everyday objects and life around them and attempted "to portray the strange, the uncanny, the eerie . . . aspects of everyday reality." While their aim was to shake habitual perceptions of their surroundings, they did this not by introducing elements of the fantastic into their work, but rather by showing that there were different ways of perceiving everyday objects. Since the 1950s and 1960s the concept of magic realism has increasingly been associated with Latin American fiction. It is important, however, to distinguish between magic realism in art and magic realism in literature. While Roh coined the term in the context of the art world, to describe a specific way of portraying the mystery inherent in everyday reality without raising questions about that reality, magic realism in literature is "writing that works both within and against the aesthetics of realism." Where normal, plausible, everyday events co-exist on the same level as supernatural, extraordinary and even fantastic events whose authenticity is never questioned.

In her book, Magical Realism and The Fantastic, Amaryll Chanady explains that magic realism is characterised by two conflicting but autonomously coherent perspectives, one based on an "enlightened" and rational view of reality and the other based on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of the everyday

world. Th us the central concept of magic realism in literature is its insistence on the co-existence of the magic and the real. While a narrator of the fantastic dispenses with the laws of logic and the physical world and recounts an action which may be absurd or supernatural, a narrator of magic realism accepts most or all of the realistic conventions of fiction but introduces "something else," something which is not realistic, into the text. These elements are not highlighted for shock value, but are woven in seamlessly. Magic realism, therefore, belongs neither entirely to the realm of fantasy nor to that of empirical reality. Despite the presence of fantastic events, however, it is always linked with the "real" world, grounded in recognisable reality through social, historical and political references. The presence of an objective and dispassionate narrator who maintains a tone of complete equilibrium throughout the story is another intrinsic feature of magic realism. While the reader need not believe in the possibility of the extraordinary events narrated, the characters and, above all, the narrator must believe that all the events recounted are equally real. The narrator cannot raise questions or treat the events as puzzling.

Magic realism in literature is not confined to Latin America alone. Canada, for instance, has produced a significant body of magic realist writing (Robert Kroetsch and Jack Hodgins are prime examples) together with considerable critical theorizing about the concept itself. While little has been written about magic realism as a narrative mode in Australian fiction there are certainly texts in which elements of magic realism can be found. A story called "The Bookkeeper" by Strephyn Mappin is one example. Here we find a bookshop owner whose grandmother suddenly begins to devour all the T.S. Eliot books in the store, eventually rolling herself in the torn pages into a kind of cocoon from which she emerges as a butterfly. Grant Caldwell's short story "Nemesis For Daddy" tells of the unexpected disappearance of a man from his home and the subsequent retrieval of his body limb by limb. For example, one arm is found hanging by its hand from a tree in the park, and his torso is found floating in a hotel swimming pool. All the parts are all still alive, however, and the body is surgically rejoined and topped with a papier m‡chŽ head until the real head can be found. In both these examples, despite the rather "fantastic" and unbelievable events recounted, realist details abound. They obviously occur in a recognizably "real" world and neither the narrator nor the characters express any kind of amazement at the occurrence of such unlikely events.

In the context of postcolonial writing, however, what can magic realism offer? The term "postcolonial" is as problematic as "magic realism," but broadly speaking, postcolonial writing encompasses a wide range of discursive practices which resist colonialism and colonial ideologies. Undoubtedly notions of identity, history and perspective are important to postcolonial writers, but perhaps the most dramatic effect of the colonization process is that the colonized are forced to occupy two conflicting worlds or spaces, referred to by Linda Hutcheon as a duality of "post-colonial doubled identity and history." In the Australian situation for example, colonisation effectively created a duality of worlds for the indigenous population. The "reason" and "logic" of European intellectual tradition collided with the "mysterious" and "mythic" perspective of the Aborigines. The settler colonists too were faced with the imposition of an imported world-view onto a new, and in many ways, alien physical space. In both instances the two worlds may be incompatible in many ways, but the colonized cannot avoid defining their identity in terms of the dual worlds or spaces they are forced to inhabit. It seems, therefore, that Canadian critic Robert Wilson's ideas about the spatial effects of magic realism might be particularly useful in the context of postcolonial writing. Magic realism, he points out, creates a "space in which the spatial effects of canonical realism and those of axiomatic fantasy are interwoven . . . in magic realism, space is hybrid (opposite and conflicting properties are copresent)." Wilson calls this phenomenon "dual spatiality" and refers to Robert Kroetsch's novel, What The Crow Said, to illustrate his point. The hybrid nature of Kroetsch's space, he claims, "becomes apparent in the natural way in which abnormal, experientially impossible, and empirically unverifiable events take place." Kroetsch begins by establishing common features of spring in Alberta when he writes: "The crocuses bloomed in spring as they had always bloomed, the buffalo beans cracked yellow, the violets and

the buttercups and the shooting stars took their turn." But a magic-like fold soon creases this even surface. Vera Lang is raped by a swarm of bees. Where the bees come from, why they choose Vera for their Queen, how she can conceive a child from this impregnation: these are not questions that are asked. Indeed, Wilson suggests, "it is as if there are two worlds, (wholly distinct, following dissimilar laws) which interact, interpenetrate, and interwind, unpredictably but in a fully natural manner."

The opening up of hybrid space in magic realism makes it difficult to conceive of the "real" as a single world with a single set of rules or laws. In the context of postcolonial writing then, magic realism points to the inherent problems created by the imposition of a bizarre and UN-real European world-view onto the local reality of the colonized. In the Australian situation, texts by Aboriginal writers, Mudrooroo and Sam Watson, can be seen to align with Wilson's notion of "dual spatiality." In Mudrooroo's story, Master of the Ghost Dreaming, the colonial world of displaced Aboriginal people and displaced Europeans is described in realistic detail and presented in a matter-of-fact way by the narrator. The same manner of narration is used to describe the Aboriginal shaman's powers of metamorphosis which see him transform himself into a spider and into a goanna, see him change the direction of the wind, and see him conjure up Dreamtime companions. Within this magic-like fold the Aboriginal shaman undertakes a spiritual journey to wrest control from the pale-skinned invaders, the "ghosts." These eruptions of magic realism into the smooth surface of the text, these "abnormal, experientially impossible, and empirically unverifiable events" accord with Wilson's notion of hybrid space.

Similarly, Sam Watson in The Kadaitcha Sung interweaves supernatural events with realistic racial conflict in urban Brisbane.14 Watson's novel clearly presents two distinctive and conflicting spaces or world-views. The recognizably "real" contemporary world is depicted through a narrative which links the brutal suppression policy of the Queensland government to the present living conditions of urban Aborigines. Erupting into this world is an epic-like narrative of Aboriginal cosmology linking the ancestral beings to people of the present and even incorporating the arrival of the white intruders into their ideological framework. A conventional western world-view is carefully detailed while at the same time the narrator introduces another level of reality, that of suspicion and myth, which is inexplicable according to the logic and reason of Western thought. To borrow Wilson's words, the two worlds "interact, interpenetrate and interwind"15 so that spirits, demons and sorcery figures mingle with "real" people of different races in overlapping periods of time.

In both these texts, the reader is clearly offered two systems of possibility, one that aligns with European rationality and another which is incompatible with a conventional Western world-view. Magic realism does not create imaginary worlds. What it does create, through its "dual spatiality," is a space where alternative realities and different perceptions of the world can be conceived. Discourses of colonialism position the Aborigines as objects to be studied, observed and spoken about. The imposed social and political systems of Western culture effectively denied a space in which Aboriginal voices could speak for themselves. The possibility of a "dual spatiality" provided through the deployment of magic realism provides one space where Aboriginal voices can speak and be heard.

Stephen Slemon is one critic who has drawn attention to the proliferation of binarisms and dualities operating within settler cultures, binarisms such as Europe and its other, colonizer and colonized, and the West and the rest, for example. Slemon also suggests that magic realist narrative recapitulates a dialectical struggle inherent within the postcolonial culture.16 The binary oppositions, he continues, undergo a process of dialectical interplay which undermines the fixity of borders between them, foregrounding the gaps,

absences and silences produced by the colonial encounter. Binarisms of white and non-white, civilized and barbaric, colonizer and colonized, vocal and silent, centre and periphery are all present in both Mudrooroo's and Watson's novels. In Master of the Ghost Dreaming, for example, the Superintendent of the Government Mission for Aborigines and his wife represent the civilized, white, colonizing power. While the Superintendent firmly believes in the divine right of the Empire to bring light to the dark world of the natives, the reality of his mission of enlightenment is seen somewhat differently by the Aborigines themselves. Instead of enlightenment, colonization destroys the Aborigines' food chain and brings an end to traditional patterns of living. When their task becomes too daunting, the missionary and his wife seek oblivion through either rum or laudanum. The Aborigines in contrast draw on sustaining traditions from the past to cope with their present physical and spiritual displacement. Who then are the barbarians?

As I mentioned earlier, magic realism has been described as "writing that works both within and against the aesthetics of realism," and postcolonial writing, I would suggest, is writing that works both within and against the effects of colonialism. The hybridity of both modes of writing indicates strong possibilities for an interweaving of their agendas. Magic realism contests the restrictions of colonial space by opening up a "dual spatiality," thus making problematic any notion of a single unified world-view or reality. As Chanady notes, the enabling of new and multiple perspectives on events "allows us to see dimensions of reality of which we are not normally aware."Magic realism, with its "eruptions of spatial folding" raises questions about the nature of the worlds we inhabit. Stephen Slemon claims that magic realism's strength is that it encodes "a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems," and further, that the deployment of magic realism in literature can "signify resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems."18 In opposition to straight-forward, rational and controlled order which is the dominant style of imperialism, magic realism mixes fantasy and reality, fact and myth, while resisting classical expectations of closure and unity. While some postcolonial writers will continue to adhere to the realist mode of representation in order to depict actual conditions and experiences, it seems certain that others who wish to avoid the inscribed colonial values inherent in the realist mode may opt for the subversive possibilities of magic realism to challenge the restrictions of a circumscribed colonial space.

A literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre, magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a so-called rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites; for instance, it challenges binary oppositions like life and death and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present. According to Angel Flores, magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, or as he claims, "an amalgamation of realism and fantasy." The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected to the primeval or magical "native" mentality, which exists in opposition to European rationality According to Ray Verzasconi, as well as other critics, magical realism is "an expression of the New World reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European super-civilization, and the irrational elements of a primitive America." Gonzalez Echchevarria believes that magical realism offers a world view that is not based on natural or physical laws nor objective reality. However, the fictional world is not separated from reality either.

The term "magical realism" was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magical realism an art category. To him, it was a way of representing and responding to reality and pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality. In Latin America in the 1940s, magical realism was a way to express the realistic American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature. Yet, magical realism is not confined to Latin American literature alone, for many Latin American writers have influenced writers around the world, such as Indian writer Salman Rushdie and Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri.

Conclusion

So magic realism contains or comprises the essence of postcolonialism. The agony of the colonialism cast a shadow on the theme of magic realism. The postcolonial aspects like mimicry, hybridity and others are amalgamated into it. And lastly like the authors of post colonialism, it finishes with a question which jolts the brain but answer does not appear.

Source : a) History of English Literature by Legouis and Cazamian
b) A Critical History of English Literature by David Daiches
c) An Introduction to the study of English Literature by W.H. Hudson
d) The Short Oxford History of English Literature by Andrew Sanders