



A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MAGIC REALISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Garima Singh

Research Scholar, Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India.

ABSTRACT

The term Magic Realism was first used by German art critic namely Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a growing trend in visual arts which was about to replace expressionism which Franz Roh criticized for its exaggerated preference to fantastic and extraterrestrial objects whereas magic realism celebrates the mundane along with a tint of fantasy and magic. Later it was turned into a more significant literary movement around 1940's by Latin American writers and they are often credited for contributing significantly to make it a worldwide success and a globally acclaimed literary genre. It has now become a characteristic feature of postmodern literature widely used in literary works by writers from almost all countries of the world. In simple words Magic Realism means introduction of certain magical elements in the middle of a Realistic story. A writer on one hand paints a realistic and relatable world view in his work and simultaneously adds on certain elements of magic, wonder and fantasy in that seemingly realistic story this narrative technique is known as magic realism. The works of magic realism generally have unique plot structures. Main practitioners of magic realism in literature are Alejo Carpentier, Franz Kafka, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Jorge Louis Borges, Neil Gaiman, Alice Hofmann, Nick Jaoquin and Nicola Barker etc. Main aim of this paper is to trace the origin of magic realism with special reference to the significant works of Postmodern literature that fall under the category of magic realism and to decode the purpose behind its deployment.

Keywords : Postmodern Literature, Magic, Realism, Fantasy, Wonder.

In 1925 German art critic, historian and photographer Franz Roh coined the term magic realism during one of his discussions on the merits of a painting. His primary aim behind this invention was to appreciate a group of painters for breaking away from the decade long tyranny of abstraction in art and for moving towards the concept of realism in art. He wanted to celebrate those painters. But the term magic realism in literature was introduced in 1940 by Alejo Carpentier. He was a famous Latin American novelist. He is known as the first ever literary practitioner of magic realism and greatly influenced the forthcoming practioners of this style like Gabriel Gracia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges and Isabel Allende etc.

Alejo Carpentier's novel called *The kingdom of this world* is one of the earliest and finest work written by deploying the concept of magic realism in literature. It was first published in Spanish in 1949 and later translated into English in 1957. It is about Haitian revolution and it is often known as the representation of marvelous American reality. The book opens with a prologue in which there is a key point which says magic depends on who believes it. In this work Carpentier uses magic realism to depict the impact of slavery from an African-American point of view. It is the story of Ti-Noel an african slave who has suffered the abuses of slavery under both the french

rulers as well as the black king of Haiti Henri Christophe. In this novel the novelist has perfectly amalgamated the real life events with magic, myths, supernatural forces of nature and rituals of American slaves. And the slaves in the novel perceive these unnatural happenings as real. For example a Voodoo priest called Macandal who is the chief instigator of slave rebellion is shown to have the ability to transform himself into different forms and shapes transforming at times into a lizard, a night moth and a gannet. Similarly the main character Ti-Noel is also shown having the magical powers to transform himself into different forms like once he transforms himself into a goose. So these shape shifting powers in Macandal and Ti-Noel add the element of magic and supernatural into a realistic narrative of slave trade and slave rebellion. This weaving together of reality and unnatural elements of fantasy, magic and wonder is known as Magic Realism.

By now we have discussed the coinage of the term magic realism by Franz Roh then we talked about Alejo Carpentier who was the first writer to use this style of writing in literature but the most quintessential figure who made the concept of magic realism known to the world by massively popularizing it through his literary works is Nobel prize winner Colombian novelist and short story writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In his works he wonderfully weaves together the elements of fantasy, wonder and magic with seemingly realistic narratives and settings. In 1973 he told *The Atlantic* that he adopted the concept of magic realism in his works because that's how life actually was in Latin America. His novels are generally regarded as the best examples of magic realism in Postmodern Literature. Some of his most prominent novels that fall under the category of magic realism novels are *One Hundred Years of Solitude* it is one of the most famous work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It was Published in 1967. It is a multi generational story of the Buendia family of Macondo. In this novel he has used magic realism as a vehicle to subtly criticize the Latin American elite class families who according to the author were self obsessed to the point of being completely ignorant about the mistakes of their past and instead of learning from them they preferred avoiding them deliberately. Through the portrayal of Buendia's family he depicted how elite class people considered themselves even above the Law and reveals how little they learn from their past. In his criticism of this elite superiority he incorporated the elements of magic and extraordinary events in the middle of ordinary things like in the novel he shows two characters namely Jose Arcadio Buendia and his beloved Ursula discussing that as their child is an illegitimate one so it might have animalistic features though the child did not have animalistic features but later on one of the future child of Buendia family line is shown to have animalistic features i.e. the baby is born with the tail of a pig that's how Marquez has blended together the unreal things with real events therefore making this novel a perfect example of the magic realism fiction.

Nextly a short story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez titled as *A very old man with enormous wings : A tale for children* is also a very famous work of magic realism technique. It was published in 1968. The story revolves around a old man with wings who appears in a family's backyard on a stormy night. When the owner of the house Pelayo and his wife Elisenda see this man with wings laying in their backyard they are left startled because they never witnessed such kind of a human before who has wings out of inquisitiveness they try to speak to him and he responds in an unfamiliar language then a neighbor informs them that the man with wings is actually an angel.

The following day entire town gathers around him and the crowd starts harrasing him like a circus animal instead of treating him like a human being. The main idea of this story is to depict the insensitivity of human behavior towards those who are weak and different in some way from others. Through the portrayal of this man with wings the writer indirectly is showcasing the trauma that people who are physically different from others face. How cruelly they are dealt with. So here magic realism is used by Gabriel Garcia Marquez to depict the inhuman behavior that people exercise in society with fellow human beings if they are in any sense disable, different, weak or downtrodden.

Another famous work by Gabriel Garcia Marquez which is produced adhering to the tradition of magic realism is a novel titled as *Of love and other demons* published in 1994. It is partially based on a legend told to the author by his mother when he was 14. The novel centres around a twelve year old girl Sierva Maria who is bitten by a rabbiid dog and she is also pronounced to be possessed by a demon and is depicted as a girl having long copper hair which continue to grow even after her death so here again he has amalgamated the supernatural element of a demonic enchantment with the ordinary and real incident of a dog bitten girl. Mainly the plot revolves around an unconventional love story between a Catholic priest namely father Cayetano and Sierva Maria who while healing her from rabbies falls in love with her. Basically in the novel reality is blended with imagination, supernatural elements of demonic power and religious superstitions making it an apt example of magic realism fiction.

Moving on German Speaking Bohemian novelist and short story writer Franz Kafka has also significantly contributed to the plethora of magic realism novels. His famous novel *The metamorphosis* is a prime example of magic realism. It is the story of a salesman

Gregor Samsa who wakes up one morning and finds himself transformed into a monstrous vermin, a huge insect. Due to this strange transformation Gregor Samsa becomes a huge disgrace to his family and he is treated as an outsider in his own house and is depicted as a quintessentially alienated man in the novel. On a deeper level the motive behind employing the element of magic realism in this novel is to explore the feelings of a man's loneliness and estrangement which the writer Franz Kafka himself experienced throughout his life and that experience of isolation, the feeling of being left out and lonely is depicted by him through the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa in the novel *The metamorphosis*.

Another prominent practioner of magic realism is a famous Chilean writer Isabel Allende. Her debut novel called *The house of the spirits* is widely recognized as one of the finest works of magic realism genre. It is influenced by Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred years of solitude*. The main plot of the novel revolves around two daughters of Dal Valle family namely Clara and Rosa. Clara has magical powers using which she predicts that there will be a accidental death in her family soon and shortly her sister Rosa gets killed by poison which was actually intended for their father. But the main instance of magic realism is portrayed in the novel through the character of Clara's dog called Barrabas. He is shown as a normal pet dog in the beginning of the novel but later he grows unnaturally and becomes as huge as a horse with a tail that can even clean huge tables in a single wipe. Basically it is a unique blending of historic family saga their

ordinary life events along with magic, wonder, and supernatural elements depicted through the character of Clara and her supernatural dog Barrabas which qualifies it as a perfect magic realism novel.

Next prominent practitioner of magic realism is Indian born British-American novelist Salman Rushdie. His use of magic realism in his novels is organic and raw. He naturally portrays the hard facts and bitter truths of the world with the help of magic realism in his novels. His famous novel *Midnight's Children* is famous worldwide for its extensive use of magic realism. It traces India's journey from British colonial rule to independence and then partition. The story is narrated by the main protagonist namely Saleem Sinai. In this story Rushdie has perfectly blended together true historic events, fiction and myths to depict the national history of India.

Magic realism in this novel is evident in the portrayal of the main character Saleem Sinai as he is shown to have telepathic powers and with his powers he can not only communicate telepathically with thousand other midnight childrens of India but can also clearly read the minds of those around him. Additionally Saleem Sinai also has a special animal like sense of smell which helps him to find the other midnight's children in the novel and create midnight children's conference. Also the major events of Saleem Sinai's life throughout the novel overlap with the major historic events of postcolonial India. For instance in the novel it is depicted that Saleem Sinai was born exactly at that very moment when India got independence on the midnight of 15th August 1947. And due to his extraordinarily coincidental birth and supernatural powers the prime minister of India vows to destroy him along with all other midnight's children. And it is depicted in the novel that in order to destroy the midnight children's conference the prime minister declared a state of emergency.

The novel ends with the death of Saleem Sinai who was crushed and beaten to death by a massive crowd turning him into dust. But before dying he says that it is not the end as more and more Midnight's Children and their numerous generations will live and make a difference in times to come. This work therefore is rightly acclaimed as one of the most successful novels of magic realism genre because its mixing together of harsh realities of life with real Indian National history and fictional depiction of supernatural powers in the story all of this put together is indeed unmatched.

In the same sequence of prominent literary figures that have significantly contributed to the genre of magic realism is famous English novelist, short story writer, poet and journalist Angela Carter. Her last novel *Wise Children* is often regarded as a prime example of magic realism fiction. It was Published in 1991. It is the story of two daughters of Chance family namely Nora and Dora. In this novel magic realism is combined with carnivalesque fiction to create a flamboyant theatrical world within a humble earthy reality. Both genre compliment each other in the novel as both involve fantasy like events and nightmarish imagery. *Wise Children* conforms perfectly to magic realism because of its non chronological sense of time as the narrator Dora constantly jumps from the past back to the present and vice versa throughout the novel. Also it conforms to the style of magic realism through the extensive use of references and allusions to William Shakespeare there are five chapters in the novel just as there are five acts in a Shakespearean comedy. Dora and Nora

live on bard road; art imitates life when Dora's grandfather Ranulph plays Othello and later catches his wife in bed with someone else and kills them and himself. Also the character of Tiffany goddaughter of Dora and Nora Chance is the reflection of Ophelia from Shakespeare's Hamlet mad by love, when she has a breakdown on a live TV game show. Throughout the novel there are disguises, twins, mistaken identities and love problems all key elements of a Shakespearean comedy. This sort of intertextuality is a subtle manifestation of magic realism in this novel.

Another prominent practitioner of magic realism is famous American Novelist Toni Morrison. Her 1987 novel *Beloved* is regarded as one of the most seminal work produced using the magic realism technique. The novel is set after the American civil war and it traces the life of a family of former slaves whose house is haunted by a spirit. In this novel through the use of magic realism Toni Morrison has talked about the cruelty of the evil practice of slavery. She has attempted to reinterpret the official history of white slave owners and she has also tried to present an alternative history from the point of view of black slaves as well. It is the story of a woman called Sethe who killed her own daughter in order to save her from the cruelty of slavery. In the novel Toni Morrison uses the character of a ghost named Beloved who is depicted as the representation of the collective consciousness of black community of slaves. Beloved is the spirit of the daughter of Sethe whom she killed herself in order to protect her from the evils of slavery. Throughout the novel Beloved is used as an embodiment of collective memories of black slaves and she tries to remind Sethe and through her indirectly to all other former black slaves as well of their past allowing them to tell their own story and to create their own version of history in order to enable them to assert their identity which was lost due to the evil practice of slavery. So in this novel we witness a perfect amalgamation of the history of slavery and supernatural element of a spirit which is used as a means to heal the wounds of slave history and help the former black slaves to reclaim their true identity which was blurred purposely by white slave owners.

Another famous magic realism novel written in Postmodern period is English novelist and short story writer Neil Gaiman's novel *The ocean at the end of the lane* it is an enthralling amalgamation of fantasy, myth and memory tracing the story of a forty seven year old man who returns to his childhood home to attend a funeral and there sitting by a pond at the end of the lane he recounts his strange, frightening and dangerous past memories of magical beings, hidden worlds and a girl named Lettie Hempstock. Precisely this novel showcases the conflict between childhood and adulthood with the help of dreadful, strange and supernatural elements in the background.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion of this paper it can be safely said that magic realism is not a style of writing that writers adopt merely to create the atmosphere of magic, wonder, Fantasy and other worldly things in their novels but most of the time it is employed by the writers as a vehicle to depict the deep and hidden realities of life. For example as we have analyzed in this study itself that the major practitioners of this style like Alejo Carpentier and Toni Morrison used magic realism in their novels to criticize the evil practice of slavery and to highlight the brutal treatment that slaves were subjected to. Similarly almost all writers who adopt this style try to convey a deeper sense of

meaning through their novels on various subjects that they deal with. The main aim behind its usage is to understand the reality better. It brings deep, uncomfortable and harsh truths of the world to the consciousness of the reader in order to bring a change in some way. Magic realism therefore allows the writers to question and critique the accepted realities and social evils that function in the world in various forms.

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