

# Magic Realism: Contextual Development

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**Abstract – Over the last four decades, magic realism has emerged as an international literary phenomenon. It has been acknowledged and adopted as the most influential and effective narrative mode of fiction writing by the writers and critics across the world. It was Latin America where magic realism got its identity and became the most famous literary mode but, it has now developed its deviations in different geographical and cultural contexts. Now, it is no longer a narrative mode but a way of thinking. Therefore, it can not remain confined to a particular geographical location. It migrated from its starting point Germany to Latin America and from Latin America to various cultural shores around the world. It flourished more rapidly especially in the postcolonial countries. Today, magic realism enjoys a global popularity through the works of master exponents of this genre from various parts of the world such as Gunter Grass from Germany, Salman Rushdie from India, Ben Okri from Nigeria Angela Carter from England among others.**

**Keywords: Magic Realism, Latin America, Narrative Mode, Cultural Contexts, Postcolonial.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Magic realism is one of the most celebrated approaches of the postmodern fiction. It is a style or technique of writing than a distinguishable genre that presents magical or supernatural events into realistic narrative. Magic realism, more or less, is an inevitably paradoxical term. It is characterized by two conflicting perspectives—the real and the fantastic. Instead of presenting magic and reality in opposition, they are shown to be fused in such a way that the irrational is as much part of reality as the rational. This fusion of fact and fantasy is meant to question the nature of reality. This mode of writing considers magic or supernatural as part of reality. The setting in magic realist novels is of contemporary world with authentic human characters. The magic is an integral part and the most significant feature of this literary mode. But it is not at all fantastic or unreal since it is entrenched in contemporary reality. Over the past few decades, magic realism has flourished in different parts of the world moving far ahead from its Latin American image. In fact, the presence of magic realism is quite strong in the works of writers coming from postcolonial countries. It has developed its variations in different cultural contexts.

Though, the term “magic realism” was firmly established in the 1960s its origin goes several decades back. It originates with the German art critic Franz Roh, who in his book, *Post Expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting* (1925) coined the term “Magischer Realismus” which is translated as “magic realism”. He employed the term magic realism in an artistic context

for the first time as an expression for Post-expressionist German painting where real forms are combined in a way that do not conform to daily reality. Franz Roh explains the origin of the term magic realism by saying that, “with the word ‘magic,’ as opposed to ‘mystic,’ I wished to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (Zamora and Faris 15). Roh never gave a concise definition of magic realism. His book, however, contains various characteristic elements with which he formulated his conception of this new term.

The popularity of Roh’s term magic realism spread from Germany to other European countries. Roh’s ideas influenced the Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli (1878-1960), who played a major role in the development of the term in Europe. Bontempelli, for the first time, applied Roh’s term, magic realism in writing and not to painting. He started a bilingual magazine *Novecento* in 1926 and published magic realist writings.

With the Spanish translation of Franz Roh’s book, the term was transported to Latin America and was adopted by many well-known Latin American writers who published the first wave of magic realist texts. Magic realism gained its identity and widely popularized by the Latin American writers. Authors including Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Angel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende and Carlos Fuentes are the chief exponents of the term in Latin American context. The beginning of magic realism in Latin America is seen in the novel of Jorge Luis Borges- *Historia universal de la*

*infamia* (A universal History of Infamy) (1935). One of the first fundamental studies that firmly established the term magic realism as something inherently associated with Latin American literary production was, *Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction* by Angel Flores published in the magazine 'Hispania' in 1955. For Flores, magic realism is characterized by "transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal" (Zamora and Faris, 114) but it also consists in "the amalgamation of realism and Fantasy" (Zamora and Faris, 112).

Alejo Carpentier, the Cuban writer who is traditionally considered to be a major representative of magic realism, devised his own theory of magic realism. He popularized the trend by using the term *lo real maravilloso Americano* or "Marvelous American reality" in preface to *The Kingdom of This world* (1949). This "Marvelous real", for Carpentier, is typical of Latin Hispanic context and is firmly embedded in the richness of the American continent and its history, mixtures of cultures and races and is an integral part of the territory of Latin America.

Carpentier's formulation of magical realism, as a mode of literature emerging essentially from the largely untapped and Baroque magnificence of his continent's geography, history, diversity, mythology, has been taken by many scholars as seminal.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the most representative magic realist writer in Latin America, adopted the term magical realism for his own writing and specified it in greater detail. It is with the writing of Garcia Marquez, magic realism became globally acclaimed literary mode. Marquez shares similar ideas on magic which Alejo Carpentier talks about. Both authors believe that "American reality is defined in terms of extraordinary qualities that distinguish American reality from the European one." (Lukavaska 28). These qualities according to Marquez, are part of the American heritage of slaves brought from West Africa. Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is the most famous example of magic realism. It serves as a main source for the analysis of magic realism in the context of Latin American literature.

After establishing itself completely in Latin America, magic realism moved to English-speaking countries. In the English language literature, it appeared first in the early 1970s in Canada, West Africa and the United States and now spans many locations across the globe like the Caribbean, South Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand. Probably the best known writer of magic realism in the English language is the British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie. Rushdie has provided new dimension to magic realism through his remarkable works like *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses* and *Shame*. Looking at the history of magic realism, it becomes clear that Rushdie's English-language form of magic realism straddles and, at the same time deviates to certain extent from both the surrealist tradition of magic realism as it developed

in Europe and the mythic tradition of magic realism as it flourished in Latin America. Another remarkable magic realist author from English-speaking countries is Angela Carter, the most celebrated English feminist writer of the 1980s and 1990s, who wrote some remarkable magic realist novels like *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991).

Outside Latin America, Canada has been cited as one of the first locations where magic realism gained a strong hold. Here, magic realism has been recognized as a "sub-genre" of Canadian literature. Canadian writers took the advantage of magic realism to explore the country's hybrid nature. Writers like Robert Kroetsch and Jack Hodgins wrote magic realist texts following postmodern as well as postcolonial style of magic realism. Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* is most famous magic realist novel in Canadian literature. Jack Hodgins' magic realist novel is *The Invention of the World*.

In Indian English writing, magic realism could not attract much attention of writers. Apart from Salman Rushdie, in Indian English writing, Amitav Ghose and Arundhati Roy are two other notable writers who adopted magic mode of fiction. However, their form of magic realism is less exuberant, and less ubiquitous than that of Rushdie.

In African context, magic realism seems to be associated with the movement of postcolonialism. An intense postcolonial attitude is quite evident in almost all African magic realist texts. African magic realist writers tend to share the African history and cultural traditions of Africa, both oral and written. African magic realism focuses more on the incorporation of local beliefs, traditions and myths. The most notable author of magic realist mode of writing in African literature is British Nigerian Ben Okri who wrote the prestigious Booker Prize winning novel, *The Famished Road*. Apart from Ben Okri, Amos Tutuola and Andre Brink are two other African magic realist writers.

In the United States of America, the most famous writer of magic realist mode of writing is Toni-Morrison. Morrison's magic realist novels reflect her cross-cultural context as an African American, and use of oral culture and mythology adopted from West African culture. Morrison's magic realist novels are, *Songs of Soloman*, *Beloved* and *Jazz*.

In European context, the magic realist ideas propounded by Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli played a very crucial role in the development of magic realism. Many writers in Europe were influenced by the writings of Bontempelli who adopted the idea of magic realism from Franz Roh. The most popular magic realist writer in mainland Europe is German novelist and Nobel laureate, Gunter Grass. Grass wrote globally

acclaimed magic realist novel *The Tin Drum*, a key text in European magic realism.

## CONCLUSION

Though, magic realism is often regarded as primarily a Latin American phenomenon, it has now developed into an influential narrative technique of fiction widely used in many parts of the world and spread from its Latin American context to other national literatures and developed their own deviations from its former pattern. It has been successful in migrating to various cultural shores. In fact, it has now become the most suitable and preferred mode of literary expression among writers coming from postcolonial countries. Magic realism is nowadays a complex, global literary phenomenon.

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