

Magic Realism: A Distinctive Critical Concept in Literature

Dr. M. Maniruzzaman
Dr. Md. Muhasin Uddin

[Magic realism as a mode of reality in arts and literature is almost a century-old concept and still in vogue with remarkable philosophical and practical base in the field of literature. In this long span of time it has to have faced a considerable number of threats from other literary theories and philosophies of art and life. Some of them have even proved terrible enough to jeopardise the existence of magic realism as a separate entity in the critical history. The major threats include (i) the strain magic realism had to bear to balance between the prevailing turmoil of the society and the serenity people were longing for, (ii) the philosophically perceivable discrepancy between the outside and the inside of objects, and, (iii) the canonical ruling of European reality over the marvelously mundane reality of 'the other'. The threats mostly gathered their strength from the paradoxes underlying the names that magic realism has assumed at different times along its history of development as a critical concept. Magic realism could however narrowly survive as a mode of literature and as a form of philosophical reality, overcoming all those mounting threats or crises. This essay aims to show how that survival has been possible.]

A group of painters in Germany, weary of the turmoil of the First World War and again weary of the ennui and angst caused by the ignominious defeat in 1919, were longing for some moments of serenity and tranquility. Painting, being one expected source of that tranquility for the mind, was supposed to be a common resort for the artists and the public as well, in this critical time. But it was a turbulent time even

for painting which is one of the grand modes of art. Troubled by this turbulence, painting was recurrently changing its track through a number of painting movements. There were so many radical movements in the early 20th century, such as expressionism (1890-1920), fauvism (1905), cubism (1907-14) and futurism (1909-14) (Menton 14). All these movements with their transitoriness and the resultant restlessness contributed to the strain already burgeoning in the artists' mind due to the formidable social and political situations. This was the background and a great problem, as well, facing the artists when a new mode of painting called Magic Realism stepped on to the stage in the 1920s with a determined intention to solve the problem.

Naturally, an inherent awareness of this problem and an intention to solve it were traceable in the practices and the works of the writers and painters even some years before this final attempt of solution by Magic Realism. Some instances, in this regard, relate to the writers like Guillaume Apollinaire, or to the artists like Pablo Picasso. The crusader of Cubism, Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) had undermined his forceful 'avant garde' (quest for the new) of Cubism by praising ex-Fauvist Andre Derian's traditional virtues of order, harmony and discipline in the new painting which showed an inherent craving for serenity. Pablo Picasso (1881-1974), the cubist also reverted to a serene and tranquil neoclassical style exemplified by *Four Classical Figures* (1921)(Menton 15). These instances of showing an urge for serenity to escape or get rid of the restlessness of the time by those great masters provided magic realism with the necessary support for the task it intended to perform.

Inspired by those instances the foremost exponent of magic realism, Franz Roh, first illustrated the prevalent modes of painting and thereby demarcated the magnitude of the problem that was burgeoning up. Roh stressed the point that

expressionism invested the everyday and the commonplace with exoticism to achieve the effect of a psychological shock. Even the peaceful and pacifying religious symbols assumed a formidable look and shape with a foreboding of something ghastly and fearful. Under this expressionistic mode, a picture of a city could be resembling ‘the destruction produced by a volcanic lava’ (Roh 16). This expressionism could even stretch the reality far enough to show animals walking in the sky (Roh 17).

In this prevailing phenomena, magic realism set out to drive away this turbulent exoticism from painting in order to retrieve composure and serenity of mind already lost under the social strain. With that end in view it chalked out a rather elaborate program which could be summed up in the following points.

- a) To vanish the fantastic dreamscape to help the real world emerge before our eyes.
- b) To declare a death to the ‘fanatic transcendentalism’ and in place of that to ‘celebrate the mundane’.
- c) To nurture a thoughtfulness under the manifested ‘profound calm’.
- d) To drive out all expressions of ‘convulsive life’ and ‘fiery exaltations’ and instead to present a truly vigorous but ‘metallic and restrained life’.
- e) To maintain the proper order and perspective of the objects in order to perfect the resemblance of the real world as mightily as to even ‘invite our footsteps into that world’.

With the successful completion of this program, serenity again prevailed in the realm of visual arts, especially in painting. The faith in the power of modal serenity of art to calm and quieten a restless mind received official recognition through a rather grandiose German exhibition of realistic paintings organised by Gustav Hartlaub, which continued from June 14, 1925 to Sept 13. The painters from

outside Germany also were in the list of Hartlaub, to collect from them selected magic realistic paintings. The list includes many prominent ones, for example, Picasso, Andre Derian and Auguste Herbin from France; Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carra from Italy; and from Germany, too many to count, like, Carlo Mense, Georg Schrimpf, Alexander Kanoldt, George Grosz, Rudolf Schlichter and many others (Guenther 41-43). This large scale enlistment of the masters in the magic realistic exhibition speaks loudly how they had fervently accepted the solution of magic realism to the problem of the pervasive restlessness. However, unfortunately the other modes of arts were still intensifying and complicating that abiding restlessness.

The appendix of Franz Roh's book *Nach Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der Neuesten Europaischen Malerei (1925)* serves as a second proof for the fact that the artists had accepted magic realism to solve the problem of imbalance between the prevailing turmoil of the society and the serenity people were longing for. In this appendix there are a series of almost ninety replications of magic realistic works of the great masters of the time. (However, several of them were to serve as contrast to the magic realistic ones). These great works of magic realism and their appraisal inside and outside Germany showed a wide-ranging success to solve the problem of imbalance between the 'prevailing anxiety' and the 'longed for serenity' in the field of art, which the post-World-war Germany was facing tremendously. But while working out this solution magic realism fell into some other more serious problems. The first problem it faced was its rather casually formulated name Magic Realism.

Then the slogan of magic realism was the celebration of the mundane. And its adhesion with true naked reality was strong enough even to label it as 'fanatic

naturalism', whereas very paradoxically the name being 'magic realism' it had to promise or offer something magical. This paradox put it in a real crisis.

Hartlaub's phrase 'neue sachlichkeit' (New Objectivity) for magic realism was a solution to the problem. This name saved magic realism from its obligation to offer things which are expected to be magically unreal. The people of cultural arena also took the solution easily and candidly and they almost forgot the original term 'magic realism'. This was an accepted solution and during the whole tenure of magic realism in Germany. It had to face no further crisis until a devastating role of Nazism paralysed any healthy culture of art or literature in Germany, magic realistic or not magic realistic whatever it is. In 1933 the Hitler regime pronounced any artist 'degenerate' if he did not in some way espouse the party line of Nazism. Hartlaub was fired from his job as museum director and Roh, as a 'cultural bolshevist' was taken to the Dachau concentration camp (Guenther 55). Most artists had to welcome almost similar fates. So the problems of art and painting then bore little significance when the fate of the artists themselves was so tragic.

But the concept of magic realism had by this time crossed the boundary of Germany. It reached Spain through the translation of Roh's 1925 book into Spanish which was published in Ortega y Gasset's influential journal *Revista de Occidente* in 1927 (Guenther 55). Then magic realism gradually made its way to many other countries: to Italy also in 1927 through Massimo Bontempelli's journal *900*; to Central and South America in 1933 with the fleeing refugees from Germany; and to the Netherlands in 1942 on the invitation of the writer Johan Daisne. The concept journeyed to these lands under only one name- 'Magic Realism', not 'new objectivity'(neue sachlichkeit). So the problem appeared again: how can it be magical as it presents only true and naked reality at every point?

This time without the help of an appropriate substitutive name like 'new objectivity', the term magical realism had to search for a permanent solution to justify its name. Roh had actually kept the term 'magic realism' rather suppressed and shadowed under the dominating name 'new objectivity'. However in his interpretation of the concept he left some points which came forward indirectly to help for a solution to the abiding paradox underlying the term. Those points explained how to work out magic through a perfect delineation of the mundane and naked reality. He foregrounded three components of magic; 'Spirit within an object', 'the elemental happiness of recognizing an object' and 'the truly unending complex that we understand by the name of an object' (Roh 19). In a magic realistic painting a painter's skill ensures a simultaneous switching of the painted object on these three components together and the result is 'magic' enchanting any viewer. This is magic not by letting an animal fly in the air, rather, this is magic by enabling a viewer discover everything around him as if the viewer were an alien from some other world and he has seen these things never before.

Every visible object within its palpable exteriority contains its essence and energy. Whereas expressionism begins with splitting up that external shell of the object to open and to present glaringly the inner essence, energy and spirit before our eyes; magic realism arduously keeps the object with its external skin intact and engages our eyes upon that exteriority where, to our utter enchantment, the inner essence, the mystery or the spirit, is seen palpitating underneath. The point is that a magic realist works on the exteriority but through that palpable exteriority the mystery and essence of the object is discernible. This mystery palpitating behind the surface then invites and helps the viewer to recognise something transcending the object itself. The complex web in which each and every rare and banal object is interwoven then begins to disentangle itself before the viewer's gaze widening his

philosophical vision. This total process and its effect is the magic of magic realism, as Roh tried to explain.

This explanation, however could not give a permanent solution to the paradox of the term. The paradox again revived as a problem when magic realism left its home Germany and made its new celestial abode in Iberoamerica in the 1940s. In this new settlement it had to undertake a new course of business. The problem arose as to whether this new course of business conformed to the manifesto it so far had upheld.

Through Ortega y Gasset's *Revista de Occidente* magic realistic concept had presumably reached Latin America in 1927. Then the concept was widely disseminated throughout the Central and South America when thousands of people under the horrible torture of the Third Reich in Germany fled from Germany and settled here (Guenther 61). But the Latin American cultural field, especially the literature of Latin America did not begin to run the gamut of magic realism as a literary and philosophical concept until the late 40s. In 1948 Arturo Uslar Pietri first recorded a rather conspicuous presence of this new trend 'magic realism' in the short stories of Latin America (Leal 120). Beside this record, he also left a comment that this new trend was rather inappropriately called magical realism. In his own word "what for lack of another name could be called a magical realism" (Leal 120).

This comment reflects on the problem which 'magic realism' first encountered in Latin America. The problem was grounded in the functions which the common practice of 'magic' was supposed to undertake universally. But the word *Magic* as a part of the phrase 'magic realism' had had a long association with two great fields of art - 'painting' and 'literature'- and from that association it acquired two distinct

sets of functions far away from the functions of magic crafts. Again it is to be kept in mind that in its association with painting it had all touches with European cultural set-up, and in its association with literature it had all touches with Latin American cultural set-up and society. So the two sets of functions acquired from these two fields and two continents are supposed to be widely different. Based on those two sets of functions, the problem is to be seen in two perspectives:

(1) The first perspective is a constitution of these facts: a) magic realism is a term originated to label a mode of painting, b) magic realism is a concept coming as an effort to assuage philosophically the agonies of the creative mind under the turbulence and atrocities of the world war; and c) magic realism is a search for an alternative as a relief from the ghastliness of expressionism.

(2) The second perspective refers to an intellectual plain in which we can think that a mode of literature called ‘magic realism’ and a strange mode of cultural reality called ‘the marvelous real’ are identical and they together form a philosophical base for the Latin American fictional literature.

While viewing the problem in the first perspective, we might feel a foolish instinct to consider the solution given by Franz Roh. Roh’s explanation regarding the capability of magic realism to create magic concerned only the sphere of painting. The much wider amalgam of colours and spatial forms (Roh 19) that switch on all the tactile effects to approach the ultimate enigmas and harmonies of existence through a hidden stereometry (Roh 23) and thereby to contribute to the magic obviously refer and relate only to painting. So Roh’s justification of the term ‘magic realism’ does not work in the sphere of magic realistic fiction to justify the adopted name in the realm of literature.

Now in the second perspective, the justification of the name 'magic realism' can be shown as a gift of the linguistic theory of signification. We have hinted at it in the second perspective that leaving Europe far behind, magic realism had to undertake a new course of business in the new land of Latin America. This new course of business on the shoulder of 'magic realism' involved rather philosophically the theory of signification. How this theory of signification came to solve the problem of justifying the name of *magic realism* is an interesting story.

The gap between the signifier and the signified is a problem running along the history of language from time immemorial. The problem reached an extremely complicated state in Latin America. There were multitudes of factors contributing to it. First of all the cultural history and background of Latin America did not develop the language Spanish and therefore the words of Spanish occasionally had reasonable failure to produce the desired signification. Again under a colonial rule the writers had to keep a deliberate gap between the signifier and the signified so that the gap could be filled up with couples of other probable significations if the signified directly sounded unpleasant or intolerable to the 'royal ear'. Furthermore, the Latin Americans had a material world which defied any realistic explanation. This strange world was not strange to them, rather it was their day-to-day reality. However as a consequence of their European learning they began to call it the Marvellous Real (*lo real maravilloso*). The marvellous and the occult existing in their practical life put their day-to-day life into an ethereal and amorphous existence if judged by the canonical realism of Europe. To represent this world the signs of the language needed a set of alternative signification which could transmute the objective world through the consecutively alternated set of significations into a fluid or amorphous state of existence.

This ineluctable gap being both naturally essential and socially beneficial was badly in want of a system of narrative that would bridge up the gap between the signifier and the signified with an inexhaustible supply of variable significations. Magic realism embodied that narrative for the Latin Americans. So at the inception it had to perform at least three specific jobs. It enriched Spanish language in Latin America multiplying its suggestions or significations so that the language (the signifier) can hint at numerous suggestions some of which with every probability are supposed to be nearer to 'the signified'. Thus this new mode of narrative decreased the distance between the signifier and the signified which the verbal structure of language cannot decrease to that point. Next the narrative of magical realism with its attempt to create the complete significations had the advantage of shifting from one set of signification to another. So the 'complete significations' with their slipperiness created 'a deceptive seeming' targeting 'a decided unreality'. This slipperiness in the vast area of 'complete significations' served as a safeguard for the writers inheriting a long history of the colonised collective mind, as the writers could successfully elude any probable offensive interpretation of the text by using some set of alternative significations.

The emergence of novel in Latin America might not have been so delayed if this new mode of narrative had reached the Latin American writers or had been contemplated by them earlier. Lizardi's novel, *El Periquillo Sarniento* (The Itching Parrot), which could surprisingly elude the understanding of the Press Act protectors, (Langford 4) had surely some elements of this slippery significative system contributing to the novel an air of *magic*. That novel of Lizardi which is now counted as the first novel in Latin America might have been preceded by many ones more successful than it, if magic realism had earlier come or emerged out to show this magic of slippery signification.

Last of all the existing fluid reality of Latin America which had little concrete formation and could magically magnify itself to the mountain or shrink itself to the miniscule did not invite canonical European realism for its portrayal. Therefore, this reality found magical narrative a match for it, as this mode of realism could adapt itself, with the fluid elusive reality of the Latin Americans, supported by its stock of fluid and slippery significations.

When the reality of the Latin America breaks away with the canonical line there happen lots of things, elusive and illusive to the European eyes. Death becomes occasions of gorgeous ceremonies of life, leaving behind its usual realistic features. Comala the setting of *Pedro Paramo* by Juan Rulfo also becomes ‘construct’ of magical narrative where death and life merge together and the same characters tread on that piece of land at the same time both as dead and alive. Mackandal far away from the earth runs on producing strings of live events on the earth, as we find in *The Reign of the World* by Alejo Carpentier The slippery and shifting significative system of magic realism best suits this elusive form of reality in Latin America.

Taken apart from the realm of visual art, magic realism thus constituted a narrative mode with a remarkable power to generate a mighty signifying force, filling up the void between the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ with a large stock of significations. These multitudes of significations with their characterised slipperiness and elusiveness created and ungraspable reality which is magical. This magical effect of this new mode of narrative again justified the name ‘magic realism’ in the field of literature in the context of Latin America.

This solution given and supported by the functions of magic realism as a narrative mode should remain valid as long as Latin America exists with its realities, concrete in their own eyes, but amorphous in the European eyes. Nevertheless, it could not actually go on with such a hazard-free existence. The theoreticians at last problematised its distinct entity while demarcating its boundary line. The first problem that appeared while drawing the boundary line of magical realism was its intermingling with Surrealism. Surrealism, another concept also born in Europe, unlike magic realism of German painting was a leap above and beyond reality. Surrealism in which logic succumbs to a mighty imaginative force cannot bring in more hypnotic state of reality than magic realism. A real battle with an unreal ghost, the lion's head on the pelvis of a widow, the encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine leading to ermine spoons (Carpentier 85),- none of these European surrealist events are less magical than flying carpets and living dead of *Cien Años de Soledad*. So magic realism faces this annihilating comment that it is nothing more than the extension or projection of Surrealism.

Alejo Carpentier, the man with a lofty pride about the marvelous real in America, comes up with an agreeable solution to this problem. He draws at least one distinguishing line between surrealism and magic realism. Surrealism emerged out of the collective boredom of the Europeans at their clinical reality. They had to nurture, maintain and uphold this clinical reality for centuries since the inception of Renaissance; as the essence of Renaissance- the reason and enlightenment - could only be compatible with just the singular form of reality, and can by no means admit of any plurality of the form of reality. A deviation from that reality then meant a severe blow to the years' achievement of the renaissance. But a true creative mind cannot agree with such a sterile adherence, and therefore their

longing for a breakthrough initiated by avant garde at last found an effective ventilation through Breton's manifesto of Surrealism. They expressed their will for a marvellous real which is, according to them, more real than clinical reality.

The result of that desired marvellous surprisingly but naturally entertained a great defect. It presented dreams 'operated by technicians' in a bureaucratic way. By invoking traditional formulas, it depicted a world with 'donkey devoured by the fig', 'children threatened by nightingales' or 'horses devouring birds' (Carpentier 85). This depiction constituted surrealism with super real strangeness, but it could not create any drop of faith because in European enlightened society life is devoid of such strangenesses.

Magic realism, on the other hand, is at the same time magical and faithful. In Latin American context a Jose Arcadio with a tail, a woman flying above never to return as in *Cien Anos de Soledad* by Marquez, or an event of a man's crumbling like a heap of stone while attempting a blow against the ground (Rulfo 123),- always bears that faith ample enough to make them credible to anybody. In short the phenomenon of magic realism presupposes faith, but surrealism does not. The surrealists invoke magic in disbelief but there is no room for disbelief in magic realism. This has many times been iterated by writers like Marquez or Allende. Marquez claimed many times that he wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude* simply by looking at reality, our reality. Thus faith serves as the distinguishing feature to differentiate between magic realism and surrealism. And this is how magic realism once again gets its problem solved by this explanation of Carpentier which declares magic realism valid eternally as a separate and distinct entity in the realm of art and literature.

Another similar critical confusion arises while attempting a distinguishing line between Fantasy and Magic Realism. The fantastic tales also, like magic realistic ones, portray a world of strange events. Therefore in a critical analysis they both tend to merge together again with an insidious intent to abolish the necessity of the distinct entity of magic realism. This time Luis Leal resolves the crisis drawing the distinguishing line between them. "Let us keep in mind" says Leal "that in these magic realist works the author does not need to justify the mystery of events, as the fantastic writer has to. In fantastic literature the supernatural invades a world ruled by reason" (Leal 123). But the world of magic realism defies 'reason'. Reason and enlightened rationality is less true there than the mystery encountered around. Magic realistic literature thus keeps its distinction from fantastic literature by its defiance at reason and its rejection of any undercurrent to explain or rationalise mystery or the unreal it presents. Thus this last problem of magic realism about its losing distinct identity and merging with *fantasy* also gets solved through the explanation of Luis Leal.

Beginning from 1920s in the field of art thus magic realism has been flourishing as a trend, first in art and then in literature, overcoming all the problems and obstacles ensuing from its nomenclature. As a mode of literature it does not pervade the whole area of literature. Only fiction is its domain. But its influence and control over that domain is veritably more powerful than that of surrealism, fantasy and other modes of realism. However the burgeoning overarching theory of post modernism seems too powerful and ubiquitous for magic realism to be a match. Post modernism has already claimed magic realism as a part of it, as one of the eclectic components of it (D'haen 129). But in that case also we may hope, in course of time, post modernism will give magic realism its due as the latter is a mighty agent of the overarching theory postmodernism itself, and once granted that due it will eternally persist as a distinct mode of literature.

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