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Prospects of Studying Magical Realism in Nigerian Literature

Wadinga Wandama

Department of English

University of Jos.

E-mail: wandadinga@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper exposes some of the reasons why magical realism is an interesting topic in literary studies today. It is a brief review of some notable magic realist writers and their popular works. It draws attention to the possibility of studying magical realism in Nigerian literature using the novels of some Nigerian authors who have met the criteria that literary theorists have proposed for the study of this mode. This paper also reviews some of the important features of magical realism in world literature today.

Introduction

It is often said that the truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction itself has been debated to be a fabrication of lies. This assertion does not explain how it is that so often, a fictional story becomes highly compelling for its readers to the extent that it becomes a tool for social transformation in the society. Meanwhile, a document that is a statement of fact and occurs without any literary embellishment is considered a historical document rather than a fictive document. The difference between these two kinds of documents is that, as literature teaches and educates, it also entertains. Magical realism is evidently a fictional mode which is concerned with stretching the mind beyond the boundaries of realism into the place of seeing things with a totally different dimension. Realism still holds its attractions for readers, but beyond this is the fact that unique experiences stand out in an individual's memory much more than the mundane occurrences. Apart from this, the spectacular requires closer investigation and open-

mindedness both in presentation and appreciation. This is because magical realism is highly experimental in nature.

This experimental aspect of magical realism can apply to the written text but it is realism in contemporary Nigerian society. A review of stories from Newline, a presentation of the Nigerian Television Authority will convince any listener. There were stories of a woman's body that did not decompose after almost thirty years in Lagos, the report about the bleeding image of the Virgin Mary in Benue State, the report of a youth corps member whose breast continued to swell uncontrollably until she died in Bauchi, or the report that people's private parts were disappearing and many more mysterious events. It is this kind of society that Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote about in his novels. His fame in the use of magical realism is unprecedented. Sustained interest in the novel brought about its translation into thirty-seven languages and sold thirty million copies of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Marquez's magical realism was borne out of the troubled Latin American history during the years of civil strife in Colombia. His masterful and fascinating imagination has made a name not only for himself but his native land as well. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is lengthy but unbelievably easy to read because it sustains the reader's interest to the very last sentence. This story about seven generations of the Buendia family reads like the history of generations of the Latin American people. The myths, beliefs, and traditions of the people are given an aura of reality even though the events are extraordinary. The simple life of peasants transforms into a life of magic and enchantment that simply just happens. Although *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is his most popular novel, he has written others as well.

Salman Rushdie, an Indian-Briton, is the novelist who wrote *The Satanic Verses* (1988) which was a highly controversial novel that was banned from India in 1989. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran issued a fatwa on Rushdie's life after the publication of this novel. This gives credence to the fact that literature is essentially a tool of great importance to the audience that receives it. Rushdie combines magical realism with historical and political realism in *Midnight's Children* (1981). In this novel, Rushdie relates the story of a boy, born at the stroke of midnight, on the exact day that India gets her independence. The supernatural powers the boy possesses, is combined with a mistaken identity caused by a switch at the time of his birth making it a tale of magic, self-discovery and national history.

Isabel Allende is a Chilean-American and has written novels such as *The House of Spirits* (1982) and *City of Beasts* (2002). *The House of Spirits* is the story of a family from a prominent aristocracy living in an unnamed country. Descriptions in the novel include a conservative political class, socialist class, a military regime, and a revolutionary opposition. All sides of the polity are described in some detail through the action, events and dialogue of the characters. Eccentric characters that display

special abilities such as clairvoyance and extraordinary beauty are depicted in the novel. Allende's story carries a message of resilience, love and reconciliation. Featuring prominently is the power of the written word, either in physical writing or as a mental activity. Writing is upheld as a means of maintaining sanity in difficult times.

The combination of real and magical elements is universal and aged. Stories of fairy tales, *djinni* as well as gods and goddesses pervade both oral and written forms of literature. Their power to influence human life expresses itself as marvelous or magical. This coexistence comes as natural in its occurrence; therefore, the dichotomy between the real and the magical is blurred. In Jennifer Andrew's article she asserts that:

Magic realist writers typically presume that readers have faith and believe in the existence of some kind of spiritual plane. Superstition is treated as part of daily life, and brings another dimension to the narratives being relayed. At the same time, special value is placed on the retention of oral traditions within these texts... thus, magic realists contest the notion of history as a linear and logical phenomenon from a wide variety of perspectives by including superstition, folklore, and the voices of the otherwise neglected members of the population (Andrews np 12 July 2013).

Some critics identify oral traditions as the root of magical realism; therefore, some peculiarities of magical realism may be identified when examined based on their geographical origins. Magical realism is a global phenomenon found in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, India, Haiti and Nigeria. From English Canada we have, *What the Crow Said* by Robert Kroetsch, *The Invention of the World* by Jack Hodgkin and *Green Grass, Running Water* by Thomas King. In New Zealand, there is Janet Frame's *The Carpathians* and from Australia, David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. Other magic realist writers are Gabriel Garcia Marquez from Colombia, Salman Rushdie from India, Isabel Allende from Chile, Gunter Grass from Germany, Italo Calvino from Italy and John Fowles from England. For Sasser Kimberly, it is the mode adopted by magical realists that stands out as the most significant factor. She says that:

The basic definition of magical realism, then, sees it as a mode of narration that naturalizes or normalizes the supernatural; that is to say, a mode on which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text, neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality. (Sasser np 29 July 2013)

Sasser notes that using equivalence as the centerpiece of the definition of magical realism is viable but recommends a definition that posits their coexistence and not their equivalence. She maintains that:

After one has assessed that a text meets the minimal modal criteria and might therefore, usefully be analyzed within the magical realist framework, a second layer of meaning is determined through interrogating the way that the coexisting codes of magic and realism interact with each other and with the other narrative elements. Based on my survey of numerous magical realist critics, this might take on any one or a combination of three *modus operandi*: subversion, suspension and summation. First, magic works to subvert realism and its representative worldview. Second, magic and realism are suspended between each other disjunctively. Third, magic functions summationally towards reality/realism: it adds to it. (Sasser np 29 July 2013)

The interaction or relationship between the magical and the real is an area which requires an in-depth study. The presence of world view, extra-textual material, and modes of interaction in magical realism are highly pertinent issues. Magical realism is a literary mode which shares some similarity with Surrealism such as the emphasis on the importance of the subconscious mind with the aim of releasing its perceptions and power to the visual realm. Also, the juxtaposition of reality and unreality is another similarity. One of the major differences between surrealist literature and magical realist literature is that in magical realism, the artist composes thoughts which express ideas that form the narrative into a story or an expression that is tailored into a structure of literary expression, with a beginning, middle and end that may be arranged in any order by the writer. In most cases, it is cyclical. The setting, characters, and themes combine as a united entity in the narrative even though they are infused with fantastic elements. With Surrealism, order is not necessary as thoughts are encouraged to flow without any hindrance from the conscious mind. This is why in Surrealism, it may be found that hallucinations and psychosis are employed as expressions of art. In magical realism it is often a means of expression which tells us about the condition of the character. It is more likely that a magical realist will express it in an ordinary manner allowing the reader room to react to it. Bowers says that:

Whilst both magic realism and surrealism in their most limited definitions are movements of literature and art that developed in the first part of the twentieth century; both terms have life beyond this period as more generally applied notions. It is as

common to hear someone say ‘How surreal!’ as it is to see a book described as magic realist on its dust cover. Both surrealist and magic(al) realist writing and art could be called revolutionary in their attitudes since surrealists attempted to write against realist literature that reflected and reinforced what they considered to be bourgeois society’s idea of itself; and magical realism holds immense political possibilities in its disruption of categories. (Bowers 23).

Magical realism therefore, makes use of narrative, characterization, theme, action, nationhood and culture as a tool of interaction and realization of a deeper relationship that is unnatural but real. The coexistence of these two planes is what makes the text magical-realist. The outstanding factor is that the magical is related as simply as possible--there is nothing outstanding or spectacular about the unfolding events. There is the undeniable presence of social events on the characters and environment; the link with myths and oral traditions; and also the supernatural.

According to Andrews:

In a Latin American context, magic realism demonstrates that the strange, is in fact, commonplace and that the unreal constitutes a significant part of reality. Instead of creating imagined worlds or distorting reality... these texts attempt to articulate the mystery behind reality and to prevent myth, folklore and alternative versions of history from being relegated to the supernatural realm or ignored altogether. (n.p. 12 July 2013).

Fantasy is a distinct form which is similar to magical realism but its distinction is taken from the narrative style. According to Bortolussi, critics like Chanady and Chiampi have made distinctions of fantasy literature based on authorial reticence. They suggest that in fantastic literature, the narrator resolves the antinomy between the real and the unreal by providing explanations for magical occurrences while in magical realism, the narrators and characters experience fantastic events as natural occurrences. Bortolussi suggests that although the world of fantasy and magical realism are similar, magical realism sustains antinomy while the fantastic resolves the antinomy or, the antinomy may or may not be resolved (352). Bortolussi offers some ways of distinguishing fantasy from magical realism by suggesting that the narrator of the fantastic is invested with authority while the magic realist narrator is ingenuous. In magical realism, the supernatural events lack a common source and there is an ironic distancing of an implied author in respect to the fictional world. Anne Hegerfeldt contributes to the dichotomy explaining that magical realism fundamentally differs from fantastic fiction by using a rhetoric of vagueness to shroud the magical events in a sense

of mystery and ambiguity (Hegerfeldt np 14 July 2013). Both Bortolussi and Hegerfeldt have identified magical realism as a form that presents “ordinary” reality, in such a way as to appear incredible citing for example, the description of ice in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*:

Inside, there was only an enormous, transparent block with infinite internal needles in which the light of the sunset was broken up into colored stars. Disconcerted, knowing that the children were waiting for an immediate explanation, José Arcadio Buendía ventured a murmur: “It’s the largest diamond in the world” “No” the gypsy countered. “It’s ice” (Marquez 17).

Magical realism is not a term that is completely abstract as may be implied. The very fact that the characters, whether real or magical, are presented in different kinds of societies is an indication that the subject matter is relevant for teaching and instructing about the universal condition of man. The mode of magical realism has been seen as an aesthetic tool used by writers who have interest in paranormal or supernatural state of existence. This statement is not entirely true. Magical realism is a field of study that has been in existence in Africa culture from time immemorial that is why it is still relevant in today’s world. This study shows that beyond the otherworldly events that form part of a magic realist vision, there is much more that can be learnt. A study of liminality, metafiction, transdisciplinarity, hybridity and narrative technique brings to light the rich content that can be discovered in the literary study of magical realism.

Features of Magical Realism

This section surveys some key concepts that the study of magical realism presents to any researcher interested in an in-dept study of the mode. It is also important to state briefly what fabulation means to this research.

Many scholars have used the term, fabulation, indiscriminately and interchangeably with terms such as fable, fantasy, magical realism and surrealism. A closer study reveals that fabulation is a term introduced into critical theory by Robert Scholes in *The Fabulators* (1967) and reviewed as *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979). According to Scholes, “the fabulators calculated departure from naturalistic representation is undertaken in the hope of obtaining a more accurate account of mental experience which itself is conceived as a kind of fantasy in which dreams are inescapable”. (n.p. 20 May 2012). Basically, fabulation in prose narratives is the art of creating, or the formulation of stories which distinguish themselves by their departure from the realistic mode of presentation. In the genre of drama, fabula describes the forms of drama especially “southern Italian farce popular in Rome until the period of

Augustus (Cuddon: 301). Walsh Richard explains that the relationship between fabula and fiction can be traced from Aristotle's *Poetics*. This is because most scholars agree that *sujet* corresponds to Aristotle's *muthos*; but whether fabula is equated with *praxis*, *logos* or *holos* depends on which theorist you are reading. The Formalist school and the Structuralist school have been interested in the concept of fabula, only that their interpretations differ. Both schools favour the importance of fabula and sujet as an intricate part of each other. The formalists regard fabula as the conceptual raw material in the genesis of the work, suggesting that it is prior to the sujet. The Structuralist perspective; insist that fabula is necessarily abstract. Walsh explains that any account of fabula is crucial to the interpretation of fiction; fabula continues to be valuable in the sense that it explores the rhetoric of fiction. *Sujet* is what we understand as a given in fictional narrative and fabula is how we come to understand it. The following is a review of some features in magical realism.

Liminality

According to Cristina Sandru, liminality or the liminal, is a discussion about the location or areas in which magical realism operates. This does not mean its geographical location but its ontological area of occupation between the real and the magical. As expressed in her own words,

It comes as no surprise that a mode expressing liminal states of being and incorporating hybrid ontologies should become the literary benchmark of those parts of the world that are similarly 'liminal', hybridic, inhabiting a space of inbetween peripherality. Magical realism has accordingly, been described as a mode of writing which arises out of postcolonial or unevenly developed societies, where cultures and civilizations, often incompatible, overlap and mix uneasily; where modern and ancient, scientific and magical world-views coexist. It thrives in transitions, border zones and crossroads...

(n.p., 3 March 2013)

Michael Linkletter proposes that Celtic literatures may be interpreted using magical realism because they possess elements that correspond with Faris's definition of magical realism. The strongest point which he identifies is liminality:

There are traditional devices in the text (Mabinogi) that are used to clue the reader into the imminence of something magical or otherworldly. These devices, or motifs, are very often associated with liminality. They frequently take the form of a passage through mist or fog, crossing of geographical boundaries such as a river, coming to a crossroad, or clearing.... Because of the ubiquitousness of this motif, one might assume that the Celtic peoples were quite comfortable with

the notion of close proximity between worlds, between the magical and non-magical; indeed, such a distinction was likely never made (Linkletter 16 March 2013).

Ingenuous Narrator

Charles Scheel's study proposes a definition of the marvelous narrative mode in French fiction, using novels by Jean Giono. He compares these novels with the criteria proposed by Chanady in defining the marvelous realism. His study pays close attention to the way in which magical/marvelous realist modes play with realism. "They communicate a sort of glow produced by childlike emotional and/or poetic vision of (real) world expressed in colourful, idiosyncratic language" (<http://www.academia.edu/1430858>). This view is similar with Bortolussi's definition which emphasizes the ingenuous nature of the narrator. This kind of narrator can be identified in the seminal magical realist novels such as in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's narrator is exuberant with this ingenuousness in expressing the events, thoughts and building of suspense.

Baroque/ Mestizaje

Alejo Carpentier writes about the baroque and the marvelous real giving numerous examples from archeological discoveries, arts and literature concerning what he considers to be baroque. He states that the baroque can best be described as a spirit that returns through civilizations, finding expression in various forms especially through the arts. According to him,

Academism is characteristic of settled times that are complete, sure of themselves. The baroque, on the other hand, arises where there is transformation mutation or innovation... the baroque always projects forward and tends, in fact, to a phase of expansion at the culminating moment of civilization, or when a new social order is about to be born. It can be a culmination, just as it can be a premonition. (Carpentier np 22 Feb 2014)

He equates "mestizaje" in America as baroque because of its "symbiosis, mutations and vibrations" suggesting that in the hybrid nature of the American and Latin American people, baroque flourishes "the awareness of being other, of being new, of being symbiotic, of being criollo; and the criollo spirit is itself a baroque spirit." It is the interception of different varieties of the baroque that Carpentier refers to as the marvelous real. Catherine Poupeney-Hart explains mestizaje in the Hispanic American context:

A social phenomenon resulting from inter-ethnic fusions, that is to say, from unions between indigenous women and European migrants. If at first, the fruit of these unions seem to have been assimilated, either by

the father's social group or by the mother, their rapid increase in number soon rendered them a distinct group... two basic categories, the Spanish (including the Peninsular Spaniards, criollos and the legitimate mestizos) and the Indians were effectively the only groups recognized originally... mestizaje is thus, initially perceived as a stigma because of its association with illegitimacy, with the frequent furtive or violent circumstances of sexual encounters between members of different social castes, then between *castas* themselves. It is stigmatized also because it rightly appears as a threat to the organization of social hierarchy.... (n.p. 11 Feb 2014)

From the quotation above we can recognize the connection between Carpentier's notion of mestizaje and the historical context in which it emerged in Latin America.

Authorial Reticence

This refers to the author's lack of explanation for magical events that occur in magical realists' texts. The author gives no explanation or surprise over these events. This deliberate withholding of explanation for magical events is typical in magical realist texts, giving them an aura of truthfulness that the narrator presumes should be accepted as natural by the reader. Wendy Faris also comments on the technique in which magical realism describes impossible events with realist detail. She connects this technique to authorial reticence:

A common technique, which is related to the first one because it concerns the way that the irreducible elements are introduced into the narrative is the narrator's use of a matter-of-fact and detached style to narrate fantastic events presenting them without comment. We have just seen a prime example of that technique in the way the narrator of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* recounts the journey of the trail of blood, passing seamlessly from ordinary events to that extraordinary one with no signal of surprise. The seamless textual fabric actualizes Andre Breton's idea that surrealist activities aim to find and fix the "point of the mind at which life and death, real and the imagined, past and future, communicable and incommunicable, high and low cease to be perceived as contradictions" (Faris 94)

Hyperreality

Eugene Arva, reviews the notion of hyperreality as expressed by Jean Baudillard. He states that Baudillard's hyperreality is "a world in which distinctions between signified and signifier have all but disappeared through successive reproductions of previous reproductions of reality" in Arva's proposition, magical

realism uses understated imagery and language to present images that resist representation especially the traumatic experiences.

Imagination, and especially the traumatic imagination, is an activity by which the human consciousness translates an unspeakable state - pain – into readable image. The traumatic imagination uses sublimative power of language in order to turn that which resists representation into a new and more tangible reality...I would add that between pain and imagination can be mapped the whole fictional strategy of magical realism, in which appearances are made real than the real. However, unlike Baudillard's depthless simulacra, overstated with facts and information, magical realism creates a hyperreality that is an unexplained but felt reality (75).

Hyperreality is worthy of note in relation to post-colonialist theory because colonialism and migration are considered traumatic experiences for the colonized and migrants.

Carnavalesque

“Carnavalesque is a term developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895- 1975) to describe the penetration or incorporation of carnival into everyday life, and its shaping effects on language and literature” (Cuddon, 111). According to Jack Santino, the carnivalesque refers to festivities generally but there are “ritualesque” aspects of these festivities which carry messages of transformation for the participants and observers. In his own words:

The concept of the carnivalesque is correctly restricted to Bakhtin's specifics but it has become widely used to refer to festivities generally. As a result, scholars sometimes have difficulty accounting for the underlying seriousness of intent or purpose of events that are ludic, festive or carnivalesque. Too often the tendency is to recognize the carnivalesque but overlook the aspect of an event that involves transformation ... the ritualesque is not an absolute quality. I have attempted to demonstrate that the carnivalesque and the ritualesque by no means are mutually exclusive but rather complementary (61).

Conclusion

In Nigerian literature today, some magic realist writers include Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri, Biyi Bandele-Thomas also known as Biyi Bandele. These writers meet the modal criteria by which magical realism has been identified. Although Biyi Bandele has often been ignored as a magic realist writer, he introduces a fresh approach to magical

realism through the contextualization of magical realism in his narratives. A study of these writers is promising for any scholar interested in the study of magical realism.

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