
MAGIC, REALISM AND THE RIVER BETWEEN

THE CULTURAL WEIGHT OF POSTCOLONIAL MAGIC(AL) REALISM

Abstract: *Magic(al) realism has for long attracted critical attention as one of the more theoretically elusive concepts which has been termed magic, magical, and magic(al), interpreted as a narrative genre, mode, or strategy, and analyzed alongside similar terms and neighbouring genres. While it briefly summarizes the troubling terminology associated with magic(al) realism, this paper focuses on the cultural significance of magic(al) realism for postcolonial writing, and delves into its role as a strategy of resistance in the representation of culture and history, its destabilizing project, and the possible pitfalls in its employment.*

Key words: *culture, duality, magic(al) realism, postcolonial, realism, representation.*

In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.

Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*

The trouble with terminology

The exuberant world of magic(al) realism, the meeting point of atom and spirit, suffers the sad fate of literary and artistic phenomena fraught with problems of definition and terminology and consequently subjected to ceaseless theoretical dissection. Discussions have been taking place too often and for too long

without reaching universally acceptable conclusions. Admittedly, magic(al) realism is an unwieldy, yet popular genre, mode, or strategy which is at times indiscriminately ascribed to literary and artistic works that combine magic and realism but come from vastly different cultural backgrounds and have different agendas. Its definitions have also seeped into popular culture and can therefore be found in perhaps the unlikeliest of contexts. One of its definitions thus opens and then resurfaces in the first two seasons of Netflix's popular TV series *Narcos* (2015–2017), a series reliant on real-life events and archival footage which only occasionally resorts to fictionalization. Despite its obvious rootedness in the realist tradition, the opening lines introduce the world of Colombian drug trafficking by referring to a definition of magic(al) realism to highlight the bizarre nature of the presented reality, at the same time misattributing its origins to Colombia alone.¹ Although the concept of magic(al) realism belongs to both art and literature, where significant efforts have been made to determine which of the three cumbersome terms – magic, magical, and magic(al) – should be applied to what, this discussion will focus solely on literature and use the term magic(al) to encompass the largely interchangeably used and more frequent magic and magical. It will also maintain a distance from debates around similar terms that seem impossible to clearly delineate, such as extravagant, mythic(al), marvelous or exotic realism. The word choice in Wendy B. Faris's 2004 definition emphasizes just how inextricably related, and therefore not entirely distinguishable, these terms are. Very briefly, she defines "magical realism" as combining "realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them".²

Attempting to give some definite shape to this metamorphic notion, Faris identifies five defining features of what she understands primarily as a mode while also calling it a genre elsewhere in her nuanced text: irreducible magic that is presented matter-of-factly, the obvious presence of the phenomenal world, the culture-dependent possibility of doubt in the reader who tries to reconcile contradictory perceptions of the events described, the merging of realms, and finally the disruption of established notions of time, space, and identity.³ In 1985, Amaryll Chanay

1 Its earliest Latin-American practitioners were Cuban (Alejo Carpentier) and Guatemalan (Miguel Ángel Asturias) while its most famous one, universally credited for making magic(al) realism internationally known and loved, was Colombian (Gabriel García Márquez).

2 Faris, W. B. (2004) *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, p. 1.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

set apart magical realism from neighbouring genres of the fantastic by emphasizing its preclusion of disbelief and anxiety and, above all, its rootedness in the real world, which is in no way privileged, rather than in one far removed from what we perceive as our reality. However, the term has been applied to different genres, locations, strategies, and discourses, and has never been successfully differentiated from “neighbouring genres such as fabulation, metafiction, the baroque, the fantastic, the uncanny, or the marvellous”.⁴ Magic(al) realism has been interpreted alternatively as a genre, mode, and “narrative strategy that stretches or ruptures altogether the boundaries of reality”,⁵ transcending the possible limitations of realism. The trouble with terminology does not end there since magic(al) realism is further subdivided into faith-based or ontology-oriented and irreverent or discourse-oriented, ontological and epistemological, neatly outlined and a bit less neatly differentiated in Christopher Warnes’s *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel* (2009). Noting their frequent indistinguishability, Faris informs us of other subdivisions and finds a certain correspondence between Roberto González Echevarría’s epistemological and ontological magic(al) realism and Jean Weisgerber’s scholarly and mythic or folkloric type. The first is immersed in art to construct speculative universes and found mainly in Europe, whereas the second is an all-pervasive and inherent quality of an essentially marvelous world and found mainly in Latin America.⁶ Adding to the confusion, authors whose writing is habitually read as magic(al) realist may be tempted to use other terms when referring to their own work. Reflecting on incompatible descriptions of society, Salman Rushdie, whose prose is seldom bypassed in considerations of magic(al) realism, proposes “the mingling of fantasy and naturalism”⁷ as an effective way of representing them. Whichever labels and subdivisions one might be inclined to use, there is a fairly strong consensus that a magic(al) realist world is one in which magic can occur in any place and at any time, so no one should be surprised to encounter ghosts in broad daylight or see flying rugs in the tunnels of the London Underground. Depending on the point of view, as seems to be the case with everything else associated with magic(al) realism, this either offers freedom from the limitations of mimesis or

4 Slemmon, S. Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse, in: *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, edited by Parkinson Zamora, L. and Faris, W. B. (1995), Durham: Duke University Press, p. 9.

5 Warnes, C. (2009) *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. VI

6 Faris, W. B. op. cit. p. 27.

7 Rushdie, S. (1992) *Imaginary Homelands*, London: Granta Books in association with Penguin Books, p. 19.

represents an imitation of a world which reveals and revels in the coexistence of the palpable and the spiritual.

Despite its lack of theoretical solidness, magic(al) realism has borne “the stamp of cultural authority”,⁸ which in postcolonial contexts endows its absence of definite shape with political significance. Its lack of specificity also provides freedom, freedom of (self-)representation, freedom from the constraints of singular and overarching frameworks and worldviews, freedom from having to choose between cultures, genres, modes, and systems of representation. That the magic(al) realist text is neither entirely fantastic nor indeed realist serves too to show that no one system of representation can be blindly trusted or relied upon. Hence, in a magic(al) realist text “real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence”.⁹ To depict our incompatible realities, magic(al) realism favours a hybrid system of representation in which neither component is valued more highly than the other. It is a system that precludes dominance, hierarchy, and hegemony and can be used as a powerful weapon of critique.

*Postcolonial magic(al) realism
as a cultural discourse*

Magic(al) realism’s ex-centric position to hegemonic systems is precisely the cause of its appeal to postcolonial writing where the magical is a reflection of culture. As has already been noted in criticism and theory that focuses on magic(al) realism, it only adds to its appeal that it originated outside the political, economic, and cultural centres. From its origins, it has always been associated with particular locations and cultures, especially when it relies on culture-specific phenomena, traditions, myths, legends, and folklore,¹⁰ but has also been interpreted as an international phenomenon by critics and theorists such as Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora. In her *Ordinary Enchantments* (2004), Faris sees it, if somewhat too enthusiastically, as “perhaps the most important contemporary trend in international fiction”, “a worldwide trend”, and “the single most important trend in contemporary international fiction”.¹¹ In terms of cultural influences at play, Faris suggests that magical realism is a predominantly hybrid genre or mode in which “magical and

8 Slemmon, S. op. cit. p. 9.

9 Warnes, C. op. cit. p. 3.

10 For more on this, see Luburić-Cvijanović, A. and Krombholz, V. U odbranu magijskog realizma u kontinentalnoj Evropi, in: *Žanrovska ukrštanja srpske i anglofone književnosti*, edited by Gordić-Petković, V. and Paunović, Z. (2017), Novi Sad: Matica srpska, str. 75–98.

11 Faris, W. B. op. cit. pp. 1, 39, 42.

realistic narrative modes frequently come from different cultural traditions”, so “their amalgamation makes magical realism a liminal mode”.¹² Further discussion will hopefully clarify how postcolonial writing employs magic(al) realism’s liminality, all the while bearing in mind that magical narrative modes have existed in all cultures and literary traditions, not least those in Europe, where they have been combined with realistic modes. Admittedly, such amalgamation was particularly relevant in genres such as the epic, romance, ballad, or Gothic, all of them predating Enlightenment’s preference for reason and logic, and the realist tradition. Insistence on magic(al) realism’s particular cultural context might prove pointless in cases where culture ceases to be a key determining factor as others take precedence. When, for instance, magic(al) realism becomes an instrument of subversion in feminist discourses or women’s writing in general, subversion may be aimed at a particular culture or, as is the case with Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson, patriarchal cultures and heteronormativity at large.¹³ In other words, to defy monolithic representations, strict rationality, restrictive normativity, or the myth of objectivity, such writing may refer to specific cultural contexts without mobilizing their myths and traditions as instruments of magic(al) realism. However, magic(al) realism continues to be experienced as a reflection of culture in authors like Juan Rulfo, Toni Morrison, or Goran Petrović, and cultural specificity remains one of its most recognizable traits, especially when it is considered in its Latin American, African-American, or generally postcolonial contexts, where it is seen as an instrument of “cultural emancipation”.¹⁴

In Faris’s view, magic(al) realism “has provided the literary ground for significant cultural work; within its texts, marginal voices, submerged traditions, and emergent literatures have developed and created masterpieces”, and it “partially reverses the process of cultural colonization” as a “powerful decolonizing mode”.¹⁵ In earlier postcolonial literature, magic(al) realism turned out to be a powerful tool in cultural recuperation, recovery, or rebirth within struggles against the depreciation, erasure, or negation of precolonial cultures. In later postcolonial writing, magic(al) realism contributes to celebrations of cultural cross-pollination against dangerous myths of cultural purity, with magic pervading both rural and urban spaces. It is worth remembering, however,

12 Ibid, p. 29.

13 For a meticulous analysis of magic(al) realism in Serbian, with special focus on Angela Carter, see Muždeka, N. (2016) *Magijski realizam u romanima Andžele Karter*, Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet.

14 Warnes, C. op. cit. p. 5.

15 Faris, W. B. op. cit. pp. 1, 29, 36.

that equally successful in accomplishing the same task are works like *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe or *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith, which do not fall into the category of magic(al) realist narratives. Achebe's work, for instance, revives the suppressed Igbo culture through traditions, rituals, proverbs, religious beliefs, superstitions, and, indeed, magic, but it does not use magic as a formal device nor does magic pervade the reality of the African community in question. Magic is inherent to the community's beliefs and is an integral component of Igbo culture, but no magic actually happens in the depicted world. In magic(al) realist postcolonial narratives, magic(al) realism itself becomes a cultural strategy of resistance and is virtually indistinguishable from political postcolonial agendas. For critics like Faris, its culturally and politically subversive potential lies in its in-betweenness. It is precisely this in-between space that opens up a world of nearly infinite possibilities for revisions and rewritings. The space between magic and realism may be likened to Ben Okri's river that becomes an insatiable road, always hungry for new alternative representations of reality, alternative histories and worldviews. Although Okri's road may be symbolical of devouring colonizing powers, it is as likely to be interpreted as a symbol of postcolonial responses to those powers. Alternative accounts that those responses offer do not only engage in recuperating what was lost or ignored, or in reestablishing severed historical and cultural ties, but also in exposing the unreliability of truth and fact. Contemplating the political and cultural damage to reality in South America in an essay on Gabriel García Márquez, Rushdie highlights that "truth has been controlled to the point at which it has ceased to be possible to find out what it is".¹⁶ Similarly, his 1983 novel *Shame* pays tribute to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) by informing the reader that under suffocating political regimes truth is what it is told to be, and then employing not fable but magic(al) realism to illustrate the idea that truth is a shaky affair. All authorized or official truths are subjected to scrutiny and set in doubt by magic(al) realism's preference for alternative accounts of (post)colonial histories and cultures, and its exposure of all pretensions to *the* truth as false.

As I have already remarked, the sense of in-betweenness, as well as magic(al) realism's essential duality, provides the space for such subversive activity. While we can surely read magic(al) realism as a genre, mode, or strategy that places its characters and readers in between or at the intersection of magic and fact, and suspends them between the genres of fantasy and realism, its characteristic merging or blending of magic and realism points

¹⁶ Rushdie, S. op. cit. p. 301.

to another interpretive direction. The world of magic(al) realism is not so much in between worlds; it functions as a hybrid world, simultaneously divided and double, created by the erasure of clear boundaries between the realms of magic and reality and born of their union. Magic is unleashed upon the real worlds in magic(al) realist narratives so as to become all-pervasive rather than restricted to confined interiors typical of so much Gothic fiction, including the so-called postcolonial Gothic. Rushdie's *Shame* follows in the tradition of Gothic interiors which here serve as a metaphor for multiple forms of oppression suffered at the hands of a repressive political regime and patriarchy, and more widely, as "the cultural metaphor of marginality".¹⁷ Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), on the other hand, allows magic to enter quite literally every pore of the novel's world, permeating reality and the lived experience even when one is not aware of it. In a bar, inside a house, in the street or forest, spirits and seemingly otherworldly creatures, whose existence is universally acknowledged but visible to a select few, occupy the same space as earthly creatures. A large body of such magic(al) realist texts creates worlds of fluid or porous boundaries which can be literalized, as in Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), or worlds such as the one in *The Famished Road* where no boundaries are visible. Add to this the contested territory of dream, vision, and hallucination, and you get a world that is very far from clear-cut, strictly delineated, or precisely defined.

Another aspect of magic(al) realism that dispenses with boundaries and evades what can be experienced as realist straitjacketing is its disruption of linear conceptions of space and time, and notions of stable or fixed identity, a disruption which is frequently understood on cultural terms. Earlier postcolonial writing thus evokes sacred time and space associated with indigenous religions, and returns to conceptions of cyclical time and time measured in natural cycles or not precisely measured at all. Such disruptions are read as counterbalancing European obsession with linear and accurate time, at the same time casting a shadow over the affiliation between temporal progression and progress, and questioning the need for clearly defined spatial boundaries and separated spaces of the natural and supernatural. In its disruptive notions of space and time, more contemporary postcolonial literature is also in tune with modernist and postmodernist experimentation, and continues to allow space and time to shrink and expand. Postcolonial magic(al) realism freely criss-crosses spatial and temporal boundaries, enabling magic to infiltrate the spaces of natural or real, and the characters to transport themselves from one historical moment to another

¹⁷ Faris, W. B. op. cit. p. 160.

or to occupy more than one place and exist in more than one moment in time. Salman Rushdie's Ormus Cama can therefore see and visit other dimensions or versions of reality and Ben Okri's Azaro simultaneously exists in the physical world and the spirit world. This also helps explain why identity in postcolonial writing is far from stable, fixed, or pure. If Achebe's Okonkwo seems to represent stable cultural identity, the very notion of stability is undermined by the arrival of colonizers who divide the community by adding to existing conflicts and converting the insecure. Later postcolonial literature represents postcolonial identity as an effect of colonization: fragmented, multiple, multicultural, and morphing, again in accord with modernist and postmodernist conceptions of unstable identity and identity as a process. Instability and multiplicity of identity is accentuated or literalized by the use of magic(al) realism, which resonates with special significance in migrant postcolonial writing where, in Elleke Boehmer's view, what she terms magic realism has become so common that "the two developments appear almost inextricable".¹⁸ While this goes a long way towards explaining the world of Salman Rushdie's fiction, for instance, it fails to encompass a large number of postcolonial writers, like Caryl Phillips or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who refrain from magic(al) realism and approach migration from other angles.

Whether they thematize migration or not, whether they explore more realist approaches to subject matter or employ magic(al) realism as a narrative device or an inherent mystery, postcolonial authors share with their Latin-American models "a view from the fringe of dominant European cultures, an interest in the syncretism produced by colonization, and access to local resources of fantasy and story-telling" to express a "view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural clash and displacement".¹⁹ Put differently, postcolonial literature in general and magic(al) realist postcolonial writing in particular becomes a means of representing cultural displacement, cultural difference, and cultural worldviews outside the Western European frameworks. Magic(al) realism's association with cultural peripheries also makes it an apt device for responding to and/or questioning mainstream culture, undermining dominant institutions, ideologies, and discourses, and suspecting authority. By undermining realism's presupposed authority in the representation of reality and straddling two otherwise opposed systems of representation, magic(al) realism challenges metropolitan cultures' claim on "truthful" representation.

18 Boehmer, E. (2005) *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 228.

19 Ibid, pp. 228–229.

Arguably the most persuasive example is Saleem Sinai from *Midnight's Children* (1981) who supposedly haphazardly, but in reality systematically deconstructs his own narrative authority while chutnifying a long piece of magic(al) realist historiographic metafiction. The novel's accidentally or deliberately unreliable and impotent narrator, its deployment of magic(al) realism, its fictionalization of history and historicization of fiction, and the overall play with notions of accuracy, precision, and veracity, all underscore that there can be no reliable narrative authority or system of representation. We should not, however, make the mistake of interpreting all realism and all single perspectives as authoritarian; magic(al) realism merely exposes the reliability, validity, and accuracy of their representations as deceptive.

As we have seen, much of the magic(al) realist destabilizing project can be found elsewhere in modernist and postmodernist literature, and strategies for destabilizing time, space, identity, motivation, form, genre, language, tradition, ideology, hegemony, binary oppositions, discourse – the list is endless – have become commonplace. A peculiarly postcolonial aspect of this project is that in postcolonial literature magic(al) realism undercuts the assumption that certain cultures are more important, civilized, or valuable than others, or that they lay a claim on reality. Yet, Warnes reminds us that magic(al) realism is not restricted to deconstructivist or oppositional strategies, but is also a vehicle for the exploration and affirmation of different cultures.²⁰ Hence the minutely described indigenous beliefs, norms, traditions, rituals, proverbs and sayings, the numerous references to traditional clothing, music, and festivities, as well as the use of local literary traditions and conventions like oral storytelling, myths, legends, and folk tales. At times these are combined with aspects of European cultures and literary traditions to create an amalgamation that is especially prominent in international magic(al) realism, epitomized by authors like Salman Rushdie, and reflective of postcolonial cultures. While postcolonial writing that declares itself anticolonial incontrovertibly gives priority to indigenous cultures, and is for this reason occasionally blamed for being nativist, subsequent stages of postcolonial literature have marked a shift away from nativist tendencies towards celebrations of pluralistic postcolonial cultures which give no precedence to any single culture. Magic(al) realism's duality and hybridity is then a perfect formal equivalent of the simultaneous multiplicity and partiality of postcolonial cultural identities, especially in authors like Rushdie, whose works epitomize what Faris calls magical realism's "radical

20 Warnes, C. op. cit. p. 152.

multiplicity”.²¹ Faris concludes that the “combination of realistic and fantastical narrative, together with the inclusion of different cultural traditions, means that magical realism reflects, in both its narrative mode and its cultural environment, the hybrid nature of much postcolonial society”.²² In that sense, magic(al) realist narratives offer legitimate versions of reality, no less real than those found in official accounts. Rushdie supports this idea by claiming that Márquez’s universe is not “an invented, self-referential, closed system. He is not writing about Middle-earth, but about the one we all inhabit. Macondo exists. That is its magic”.²³

If magic(al) realist universes are characterized by duality, one might be tempted to think, as Stephen Slemon is, that this implies a certain degree of conflict. Slemon is of the opinion that the term magic realism suggests oppositionality between the representational codes of realism and fantasy;²⁴ yet, the same term also suggests their merging. Instead of engaging in what Slemon sees as “a battle between two oppositional systems [...] each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other”,²⁵ these systems join forces to create a hybrid world where otherwise conflicted codes of representation coexist and fuse into one variegated, metamorphic, and admittedly jagged whole. Unlike Slemon, whose definition of magic(al) realism is closer to the conflicting codes of the fantastic discussed by Chanady and Faris, among others, I see no real battle here although there might be occasional clashes or an undercurrent of obstinate struggle in an effort to maintain a shifting balance between these opposites. Even though, in truth, magic(al) realism is not an epitome of peaceful and perfectly harmonious coexistence, as the clashes between the dimensions of fiction and novelistic fact in Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* illustrate, “sustained opposition”²⁶ might be seen as giving way to joyful mongrelization which celebrates cultural cross-pollination resulting from the processes of hybridization, creolization, mestizaje, and transculturation. Attempting to articulate the coexistence of magic and realism, Faris likens magic to a grain of sand in the oyster of realism: “the magic [...] refuses to be entirely assimilated into [...] realism; it

21 Faris, W. B. op. cit. p. 25. The words specifically refer to identity in magical realist narratives but, as Faris notes further in her book, they can be applied to other elements of the mode/genre.

22 Ibid, p. 1.

23 Rushdie, S. op. cit. p. 302.

24 Slemon, S. op. cit. p. 10.

25 Ibid, p. 11.

26 Ibid, p. 12.

does not brutally shock but neither does it melt away”.²⁷ Most importantly, neither representational code is favoured; in fact, priority is given to simultaneously fractured and plural, and therefore flawed, representation as the only possible system or code in a world where “permeability is mutual and incessant”.²⁸

To rephrase a little Christopher Warnes’s suggestion that magical realism naturalizes the supernatural,²⁹ incessant mutual permeability implies that magic(al) realism embraces the supernatural in its supernaturality and erases the distinction between natural and supernatural, normal and abnormal. As these are culturally conditioned concepts, there can be no consensus as to what constitutes natural or supernatural, normal or abnormal, but quite a few magic(al) realist texts invite us to unhesitatingly accept the magic(al) realist world as real, natural, or normal, while others may leave room for hesitation.³⁰ Confronting the common perception of them as mutually exclusive, magic(al) realism presents magical and real, natural and supernatural, ordinary and miraculous as complementary. The established dialogue between these realms mirrors the dialogue between cultures that, in Faris’s opinion, magic(al) realism opens:

“The magical “grace” of the irreducible elements coming from indigenous myths, beliefs, or narrative traditions allows realism to escape from the confines of its mimetic program, and the solid “grace” of that program’s realistic description allows the colonized and therefore currently disembodied myths, beliefs, and traditions to shape their own bodies, to escape from the confines of ethereal sacred space and marginalized indigenous culture and emerge into modernity”.³¹

The magic(al) realist dialogue takes place on multiple levels without necessarily rejecting realism or rationality and logic. Instead, it advocates a Blakean, or rather Boehmean, marriage of opposites that was common in earlier narrative traditions. Warnes, for instance, suggests a link between magic(al) realism and Romanticism.³² Indeed, his evocation of Massimo Bontempelli’s discussion of art that explores the miraculous in everyday life is curiously reminiscent of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), where the miraculous and the everyday are joined together to find a semblance of truth in the miraculous and latent wonder in the everyday. Although both

27 Faris, W. B. op. cit. p. 8.

28 Ibid, p. 26.

29 Warnes, C. op. cit. p. 3.

30 For more on this, see Chapter 1 in Faris’s *Ordinary Enchantments*.

31 Ibid, p. 156.

32 Warnes, C. op. cit. pp. 18–40.

magic(al) realism and the Romanticism of *Lyrical Ballads* can be accused of appropriating the folk traditions of lower classes by upper ones, they rely on inclusive systems of representation.

Since systems of representation, as well as our perceptions, largely rely on language, it is precisely in language that Slemon finds significance for representation in and of postcolonial contexts. In colonial texts and discourses, language was instrumental in constructing, supporting, and disseminating images of other cultures. Consequently, postcolonial texts have been employing language for the purpose of self-representation and deconstruction of such images. Edward Said was one of the first to study the magical potential of language to construct and solidify otherness, and create entire worlds which then pose as real, in his seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978). That we should make no attempt to find correspondences between description and reality in any kind of discriminatory discourse is also famously pointed out in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), where monstrous transformations of Third World citizens are propelled by the language used to describe them. The joint forces of language and magic(al) realist literalization in Rushdie's novel shed light on problems of demonization, racism, and xenophobia in countries that pride themselves in multiculturalism, but even without the help of magic(al) realism, the languages of postcolonial writing are powerful tools for exposing sensitive issues, resolving problems of (self-)representation, and conveying cultural idiosyncrasies. Where there is the luxury of choice, some opt for the language of the former colonizer, transforming it or not, as a weapon against him (Rushdie) or as a means of cultural unification (Achebe), while others see it as a remaining channel of intellectual colonization and decide on native languages (Ngugi wa Thiong'o). In the latter case, native languages, where available, are deemed more adequate for representing native cultures. The stamp of colonization cannot be erased, however, so the influence of colonizers' languages and cultures on native languages and cultures cannot be ignored. Does that mean that the use of mongrelized languages of former colonizers is a more reliable vehicle for transmitting postcolonial realities and cultures? Or do both choices function equally well? However we choose to understand it, the sense of duality present in the languages of postcolonial literature is one of the key features of postcolonial cultures, and it is exactly this duality that magic(al) realism formally enacts. Slemon reminds us that the much-examined postcolonial double vision has to do with "a binary opposition within language" which results from the imposition of colonizers' languages on indigenous populations and of the

export of languages to new lands.³³ Significantly, he adds that the magic(al) realist text “reflects in its language of narration real conditions of speech and cognition within the actual social relations of a post-colonial culture”.³⁴

An equally important task in the magic(al) realist text is the articulation of alternative, peripheral, and silenced histories, and memory’s truth. By undercutting the primacy of realism and treating magic as an integral and therefore expected aspect of reality, magic(al) realism offers the possibility of revisiting and rearranging history, and develops counter-narratives to official historical accounts. Official records are “monuments to fixity”³⁵ and the magic(al) realist postcolonial text is designed to destabilize fixity. Combining history with myth and legend “implies that historical events and myths are both essential aspects of our collective memory”.³⁶ Not only does it reestablish links with precolonial histories and cultures, but also offers a reminder that the earliest historical and fictional narratives in all cultures freely combined history and fiction.³⁷ The role of indigenous mythologies in magic(al) realist representations of history in postcolonial writing is indispensable, especially in its indigenist or nativist phase. Faris thus attributes the emergence of magic(al) realism in Latin America to:

“the first wave of postcolonial romantic primitivism, which affirmed the sense of a usable, natural, and indigenous past [...] as a response to the conjunction of indigenist and avant garde modes, and through a combination of Latin American and European inspiration”.³⁸

These conjunctions range from the privileging of local cultures, particularly in early postcolonial writing, to celebrations of plural cultures in its subsequent phases. That contemporary postcolonial literature makes remarkable use of local cultures and mythologies is illustrated by African fiction like Okri’s *The Famished Road* or Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007). The trajectory of such writing, in Faris’s view, resembles that of Latin-American models in an appreciation of local myth and oral

33 Slemon, S. op. cit. p. 12.

34 Ibid, p. 12.

35 Ibid, p. 16.

36 Faris, W. B. op. cit. p. 16.

37 For more on this, see Luburić-Cvijanović, A. Karil Filipi i Miljenko Jergović: o onome što „nećemo nikada saznati“, in: *Žanrovska ukrštanja srpske i anglofone književnosti 2*, edited by Gordić-Petković, V. and Paunović, Z. (2019), Novi Sad: Matica srpska, pp. 49–64.

38 Faris, W. B. op. cit. p. 33.

tradition developed out of “postcolonial indigenist novels”.³⁹ The incorporation of local mythologies and oral storytelling techniques into the novel maintains a dialogue between cultures that predominantly relied on orally transmitted stories and magic, and those that have for long favoured written texts and common sense. This enables magic(al) realist postcolonial fictions to subvert dualistic representations which inevitably privilege one mode, realistic or fantastic. As is shown by the exploration of innumerable parallels among mythologies from around the world in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, or by the coexistence and blending of polytheistic and monotheistic, Christian and indigenous religious beliefs in *The Famished Road* and *Song for Night*, magic(al) realism continues to amalgamate cultures from around the world to depict irreversibly mongrelized postcolonial realities.

Notwithstanding its potential for recasting, rewriting, and redefining, magic is occasionally regarded as a potential snare. Should we understand it as a tool of strategic essentialism or an inadvertent support of the stereotypes it purportedly undermines? By employing magic to represent worlds outside the framework of what is perceived as a predominantly Western or Western European rationality, does magic(al) realism resurrect stereotypes about non-Western or non-European irrationality, or those of the primitiveness and backwardness of non-Christian cultures? Warnes reminds us that, while studying magic, religions, and science as attempts to make sense of the world in cultural contexts, the Victorians “came up with an evolutionary sequence that took the shape of a single line from barbarism to civilization”.⁴⁰ Regardless of how much we like to think that we have advanced towards non-discriminatory thinking, newspaper headlines daily remind us that large portions of the world still believe in that evolutionary sequence. Another question which cannot be answered in any simple way is whether seeing magic as an essential component of genuinely marvellous realities potentially re-exoticizes non-European cultures? If we go back to Carpentier’s interpretation of exoticization as a confirmation of the marvellous real in Latin America, it is possible to see postcolonial magic(al) realism as simultaneously responding to the exoticization of colonized spaces in colonial discourses and contributing to the continuing dialectic the rational West/ the exotic rest. A trap is also hidden in magic(al) realism’s most distinctive trait. Because magic(al) realism presents to the characters and readers what cannot be grasped with the use of reason or logical thinking, but has to be intuitively acknowledged

39 Ibid, p. 36.

40 Warnes, C. op. cit. p. 9.

as possible and acceptable, it risks being invariably interpreted as a response to rationality, causality, and realism. Like religious beliefs, magic(al) realism relies on the faith in the reality of what is not palpable; yet, it seems to suggest, in a manner reminiscent of William Blake, that the mind and the spirit, reason and imagination need not and should not be separated. In an essay on Günter Grass, Rushdie writes that there are “books that open doors for their readers, doors whose existence they had not previously suspected”.⁴¹ The doors that the magic(al) realist text opens for the readers conditioned to believe in the separation between magic and reality invite us to suspend reason and its logic and accept the illogical, or rather differently logical, as equally real. In that way, magic(al) realism bridges the divide between reason and imagination just as it bridges the gaps between the cultures that are accustomed to the separated realms of the real and supernatural and those where these realms are thought to be mutually pervasive.

One more problem arises if we try, as Christopher Warnes does, to establish a link between magic(al) realism and earlier European genres like the medieval romance. It is his belief that “in historical, cultural and geopolitical terms, magical realism can be said to be an elaboration or revisioning of the romance tradition”.⁴² To reinforce this idea, he adds that “[h]istorical or imperial romance must be distinguished from its medieval antecedents on the grounds of their realism, and magical realism originates as a postcolonial response to this logic”.⁴³ Magic(al) realism is then a purely programmatic genre, mode, or strategy, nothing more than a reaction, a mere instance of “writing back to the realist paradigm”.⁴⁴ Warnes further limits magic(al) realism to postcolonial contexts – for him, magical realism is postcolonial romance⁴⁵ – and, despite his claim to the contrary, reinforces the idea of postcolonial culture’s dependence on European literary models. While the genealogy of magic(al) realism is not entirely free from European influences, nor does it have to be, Latin-American magic(al) realism, for instance, seems less concerned with European antecedents than Warnes’s theory of its origins suggests.⁴⁶ Influences aside, it is safe to say that all cultures boast

41 Rushdie, S. op. cit. p. 276.

42 Warnes, C. op. cit. p. 31.

43 Ibid, p. 36.

44 Ibidem.

45 Ibid, p. 38.

46 Exploring European influences may be far more useful in studying colonial narratives. Criticism has already pointed out the link between the chivalric romance and the conquering imperialist imagination that created the imperialist romance and the colonial adventure story.

of myths, legends, and genres such as the folk tale, the fairy tale, or the epic, characterized by a similar merging of the natural and supernatural and the same suspension of disbelief that we now understand as one of the defining traits of magic(al) realism. In that sense, authors like Rushdie see these as belonging to our common literary heritage. Others, however, may find the idea of a common heritage problematic because it allows cultural artifacts to be used by those coming from other cultures. Hence, Rushdie's use of Hindu mythologies and traditions, among a fairly large number of others, has been interpreted as a possible example of appropriation. To this, Rushdie says: "In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories?"⁴⁷ Even though no such courts or boundary commissions exist, "a troubling flavor of cultural colonialism permeates the mode as it writes itself from the margins toward the centers of contemporary culture and destabilizes those spatial categories".⁴⁸ This troubling flavour is likewise released in discussions concerning the utilization of European tools of interpretation and theoretical frameworks with which we again try to understand, define, and classify a phenomenon that originated outside Europe on European terms.

*Magic(al) realism:
"a dangerously unanchored position"?*

Despite the many controversial issues, magic(al) realism remains one of the most recognizable traits of postcolonial writing, though not a must. There is a certain degree of preference for it in both postcolonial literature and postcolonial literary studies, just like there is a preference for works which focus on migration. To elaborate on all the underlying causes and negative effects of this, however, would require a whole new article. The potential and significance of magic(al) realism in postcolonial writing is undeniably great. But can we truly claim, as Warnes does, that "it is in its postcolonial incarnations that magical realism fulfils its creative and critical potential to the fullest"?⁴⁹ To insist on it is to risk unfairly devaluing the creative and critical potential of a Carter or a Grass. Magic(al) realism is by no means the sole property of postcolonial writing nor does it have any real precedence over other genres, modes, and strategies, as powerful postcolonial critique continues to be delivered by more realistic narrative modes as well. We can agree with Christopher Warnes that magic(al) realism has grown into a "global phenomenon"

47 Rushdie, S. (1995) *Shame*, London: Vintage, p. 28.

48 Faris, W. B. op. cit. p. 166.

49 Warnes, C. op. cit. pp. 28–29.

whose analysis should respect “local currents”⁵⁰ even when its association with culture is not foregrounded, and claim with some confidence that in postcolonial literature, it is inevitably pregnant with cultural implications and employed as a cultural discourse. We might even go as far as to say that the magic(al) realist postcolonial text is metonymical of postcolonial culture.⁵¹ Is not that, however, one of those repetitive conclusions that in Neil Lazarus’s opinion infest postcolonial studies and, for that matter, the study of magic(al) realism?

The impression remains that the study of magic(al) realism at times runs in circles. The concept is surely theoretically elusive albeit vital for comparative analyses of different postcolonial cultures and for identifying continuities within individual cultural histories.⁵² Precisely because of magic(al) realism’s often studied association with culture, it is impossible to bring forth a single, all-encompassing, and consistent definition as each cultural variant of magic(al) realism has its idiosyncrasies resulting from specific cultural histories, traditions, and norms. The same might be said of variants of magic(al) realism less embedded in cultural contexts. We should therefore abandon the idea of “lucid and consistent definition” which Warnes, among others, recommends, and work instead with a flexible definition that lends itself more easily to different contexts. This is particularly important because theory’s inability to produce a precise, yet comprehensive and satisfactory definition is also a testimony to magic(al) realism’s “preference for fabrication”,⁵³ memory’s truth, and the truth of the created world. Memory is notoriously unreliable and each created world has peculiarities of its own, so all attempts at finding a universally suitable definition are bound to end up in the circles of the theoretical inferno reserved for concepts that are controversial, vague, debatable, too specific, too general, inconsistent, provocative, or in any other way problematic. What further renders magic(al) realism a little unwieldy concerns the danger of reductive readings and the concept’s commercialization. As a genre and mode, magic(al) realism arouses expectations, which in turn impose limitations. Since there is a tendency to read postcolonial magic(al) realism in a preformed way, its link with culture threatens to reduce it to “programmatically responses”.⁵⁴ The genre’s immense popularity among international audiences and publishers, especially since, a few decades ago, authors of varied cultural backgrounds

50 Ibid, p. 6.

51 Slemon, S. op. cit. p. 12.

52 Ibid, p. 10.

53 Ibid, p. 13.

54 Warnes, C. op. cit. p. 7.

came to occupy the centre stage of world literature, makes it vulnerable to cultural branding, marketing, and product placement. An additional danger is the high probability of commodifying indigenous culture.⁵⁵ For all these reasons, magic(al) realism continues to attract attention as an enigma that sometimes occupies, and at other times manages to avoid “a dangerously unanchored position”⁵⁶ between fact and fiction, history and myth, realism and magic. In its rewriting of history with the help of alternative stories and officially unauthorized or unverified, even unverifiable, accounts, magic(al) realism is not ahistorical but rather rooted in the particular histories it opens up a dialogue with. Similarly, it is not suspended between cultures, but continues to flower in “culturally hybrid ground”⁵⁷ as a mediator between cultures and their systems of representation. Above all, magic(al) realism is a powerful reminder that reality is a matter of perspective, “an artefact” which should prompt us to doubt “all total explanations, all systems of thought which purport to be complete”.⁵⁸

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55 Faris, W. B. op. cit. p. 154.

56 Ibid, p. 16.

57 Ibid, p. 28.

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МАГИЈА, РЕАЛИЗАМ И РЕКА ИЗМЕЂУ

КУЛТУРНИ ЗНАЧАЈ ПОСТКОЛОНИЈАЛНОГ МАГИЈСКОГ РЕАЛИЗМА

Сажетак

У обиљу теоријски тешко одредивих и стога примамљивих књижевних феномена, магијски реализам заузима значајно место као концепт који је подстакао вишедеценијске расправе. У намери да истражи културни значај магијског реализма као стратегије отпора у постколонијалној књижевности, овај рад испрва кратко разматра терминолошку проблематику, као и невоље са разграничавањем овог приповедног жанра, модуса и стратегије од сродних књижевних категорија и термина. Рад потом прелази на разматрање дијалога који магијски реализам успоставља између међусобно супротстављених система или кодова представљања како би искористио свој субверзивни потенцијал да предочи фрагментарне и хибридне постколонијалне културе и историје и истовремено укаже на проблематику веродостојног приказивања. Посебна пажња посвећује се улози магијског реализма у оживљавању изворних култура некада колонизованих простора и дочаравању плуралности постколонијалних култура, те могућим ризицима његове употребе. Рад се на крају усредсређује и на магијски реализам као глобални феномен који по појединим критичарима свој креативни и подривачки потенцијал најефектније испољава управо у постколонијалној књижевности. Испитује се коначно и како популарност магијског реализма, која се делом може приписати његовој несумњивој способности да преиспише историју и културу из угла битно другачијих од званичних наратива, потенцијално доводи до поновне егзотизације постколонијалних култура, њихове комерцијализације и комерцијализације.

Кључне речи: *дуалност, култура, магијски реализам, постколонијално, представљање, реализам*
