

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

## EXPLORING MAGICAL REALISM IN MARQUEZ'S *STRANGE PILGRIMS*: A SELECTED STUDY

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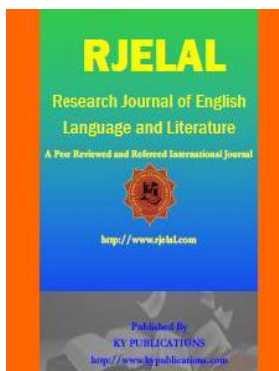
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### ABSTRACT

At the articulation of G. G. Marquez's name the term which immediately crosses the readers' mind is magical realism. In his much acclaimed "Strange Pilgrims" Marquez perfectly embodies magical realism as a technique of revamping the marvelous into actual existence. Incorporating the elements of macabre and fantastic, the stories of the anthology reverberate with apparently familiar events that take on magical and strange implications as the Latin American characters attempt to come to terms with a foreign environment. Marquez aptly shows his taste for magical realism, the perfect *mélange* of fantasy and hyperbole exhibited in a framework of reality, which pervades throughout the stories of "Strange Pilgrims". His narration is so serious and natural that he is able to produce a magical terrain where everything is possible and believable. This is the main reason why the stories of "Strange Pilgrims" attract, convince and seduce the readers. With his capacity to blur the distinction between the real and surreal, he recounts the stories in ways that so enchant the readers that they willingly suspend their disbelief and accept that magical things really do happen. The paper proposes to make a detailed critique on how in "Strange Pilgrims" Marquez, with his captivating narrative style, examines the ordinary events and details of the exiled Latin American characters combining realistic, everyday details with the elements of fantasy, folk legends and stories of magic.

**Key Words:** Magical realism, Strange Pilgrims, Latin America

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The Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel Garcia Marquez's much-admired work *Strange Pilgrims* is a wonderful "collection of short stories based on journalistic facts" examining "the strange things that happen to Latin Americans in Europe" (Marquez viii-ix). In essence, the stories of the collection deal with the Latin Americans on voyages, for various reasons, to Europe. In Marquez's magical realist narration everyday incidents appear enveloped in such a strange atmosphere that,

although familiar they shock the readers as if they were fantastic and almost every story takes a magical twist. Thus an ousted President, in quest of medical treatment in Switzerland, sells his jewels and undergoes a useless operation only to "return to his country as the leader of a reform movement" (Marquez 35). A father spends years trying to see his uncorrupted late daughter's sanctification but ends up, in the narrator's estimation, "fighting for the legitimate cause of his own canonization" (53). An

elderly ex-prostitute inferring death at her door prepares herself for the funeral only to learn that in actuality “it wasn’t death!” (114) In blurring the distinction between the real and surreal, Marquez’s captivating way of narration baffles the readers and leads them to a make believe world where although real the stories bubble with uncanny implications. Thus a woman inadvertently breaking down her car finds herself trapped in a mental institution. A couple falling asleep in one bed wakes up in a different bed whose sheets are “soaked with still-warm blood” (96). A playboy vacillates in a hotel whose wife, pricking herself with a rose-thorn, bleeds to death. Two boys discover that by filling the apartment with electric light, they can actually float because “Light is like water” (158). Marquez relates these familiar everyday details with such dreamlike magical touch that even the descriptive details achieve supernatural implications in *Strange Pilgrims* that perfectly defines the genre of magical realism.

Magical realism is a literary mode of expression which blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality putting together the detailed descriptions of ordinary events with fantastical occurrences. Though the two-word phrase appears to be contradictory, magical realism is an appropriate concept for a very powerful artistic form that has continued and lasted all the way through history and has been the object of considerable research. Magical realism is, according to *American Heritage Dictionary*, a “literary style or genre originating in Latin America that combines fantastic or dreamlike elements with reality” (qtd. in Rios). Though magical realism has been used in Europe, Africa, Australia, the U.S.A. and Latin America for many years, the German art critic Franz Roh (1890-1965) is said to have been the first to use this term officially in 1925 (Cuddon 487), due to the necessity of providing a suitable title for the “work of certain German painters of the period” (487). Roh finds in their work the “portrayal of the imaginary or the fantastic in a realistic or rational manner through sharp-focus images” (Rajimwale 519). Continuing with its development are Miguel Angel Asturias (1899-1974), Angel Flores (1900-1992), and especially Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980). Asturias

defines magical realism as the “process of the mythification of nature which can be seen in the magic world picture of the indigenous peoples” (qtd. in Imbert 4) of America. Angel Flores in his “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction” (1955) writes that magical realism is “the transformation of the ordinary and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal” where time “exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality” (qtd. in Rios). Upholding Flores’ definition the American fiction writer Holland Rogers says that in magical realism “time is not linear, causality is subjective, and the magical and the ordinary are one and the same” (Rogers). Both of them stress the fact that in magical realist fictions there is no difference between magical and real and that magical things happen as part of reality.

In the 1940s in Latin America, magic realism becomes a way to express the realistic American mentality and grows to be an independent style of literature (Pokhrel 18). Alejo Carpentier writes in the Prologue of his book *El reino de este mundo* (The Kingdom of this World 1949): “What is the story of Latin America if not a chronicle of the marvelous in the real?” (qtd. in Rajimwale 520) In Latin American fictions the marvelous or the magic comes out of the real or everyday life. The Latin Americans “find that the world they perceive does not depend on physical laws. In the eyes of those people ruled by imagination and by faith rather than logic, seemingly impossible things happen constantly” (Rave 3). It may be the point which prompts the Spanish Professor Ray Verzasconi to identify magical realism as an “expression of the New World (North and South America) reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European super-civilization, and the irrational elements of a primitive America” (qtd. in Moore). However, during the 1970s and 1980s the term gains a new application and usage with the American and Latin American literary scholars employing it to define and describe certain genre using, as Carpentier says, “the marvelous in the real” (Rajimwale 520). Within these Latin American literary scholars, Gabriel Garcia Marquez is “regarded as a notable exponent of this kind of fiction” (Cuddon 488) and his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) brings him instant worldwide

success. In the works of Marquez one finds the realistic reportage mingling in the extravagant fantasy. Marquez uses magical realism to blend reality and fantasy so that the distinction between the two erases. He once confesses: "my most important problem was destroying the line of demarcation that separates what seems real from what seems fantastic" (qtd. in Wikipedia).

However, in Latin American context magical realism was considered an effective mode of narration in situations where the newly freed countries faced many power-groups easily manipulating information which makes "truth a far more provisional, relative entity- relativism which magic realism both mimics and exploits through its own merging of realism and fantasy" (qtd. in Rajimwale 520). In Marquez's own words: "you can get people to believe anything if you tell it convincingly enough" (qtd. in Rajimwale 520). Marquez treats his stories in such ways that what is impossible in the physical world becomes possible in the world of fantasy and in his narration, instead of presenting magic as if it were real, he presents reality as if it were magic. A glance at his statement in the "Prologue" of *Strange Pilgrims* confirms it: "True memories seemed like phantoms, while false memories were so convincing that they replaced reality" (xii). In his stories Marquez frequently allows an indication to break suddenly into the action which he is narrating. He cheers in denouncing the doctrines of logic and in replicating miracles which turn the laws of nature upside down representing reality as if it were magic.

Before entering into the text it would be worth mentioning some distinct features of this mode of expression. The above particulars of magical realism give rise to several features: the amalgamation of fantasy and reality, complicated narratives and plots, skillful time shifts, ingredients of surprise or abrupt shock, and various uses of dreams. Professor Wendy B. Faris in her book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* emphasizes that for a literary piece to be magical realist it must have five qualities: 1. The text contains an "irreducible element" of magic; 2. It describes in magical detail a strong presence of phenomenal world; 3. The reader

may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; 4. The narrative merges different realms; and 5. Magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity (7). These features are significant firstly because the above particulars of magical realism result in these and secondly, Faris' emphasis seems to be all encompassing, giving clue to the point that magical realist works cannot be consigned to one particular time of history or one mode or genre of literature.

Faris' first trait of magical realism, the "irreducible element" is what the readers cannot explicate according to the laws of the universe: "by logic, familiar knowledge, or reconceived belief" (qtd. in Faris 7). In such case the readers face obscurity in settling the queries about the characters and events. The magical proceedings are not verifiable by sensory perceptions unlike people perceive ordinary events. These irreducible elements are well incorporated into the realistic textual environment of "The Saint", "The Ghosts of August", "Light Is Like Water", "I Sell My Dreams" and a few others. In "The Saint" the protagonist Margarito's seven-year-old daughter dies of fever but her body ceases to decompose. When the girl is disinterred, she is "still intact after eleven years" with the same smell of "the fresh-cut roses with which she had been buried" and most amazingly "her body had no weight" (Marquez 38). People believe the prodigy to such extent that the curiosity-seekers and even the bishop of the diocese agree to submit the body to the Vatican for canonization. In "The Ghosts of August" one haunted *Renaissance castle* is depicted where ghost wanders after midnight "trying to find peace in . . . purgatory of love" (93). The bed sheet of the castle's bedroom is "stiff with the dried blood of [Ludovico's] sacrificed lover" and the room suffuses "the unexplainable scent of fresh strawberries" (94) over the centuries. Not only that, the narrator sleeping in one room wakes up in another room, "under the canopy and the dusty curtains and the sheets soaked with still-warm blood" (96). The unique magical aspect of "Light Is Like Water" is the light itself since Toto and Joel use it as water: the two boys break "the glowing bulb"; the light as cool as water begins to "pour out

of the broken bulb” and they taking their rowboat navigate “at will among the islands in the house” (158) Light having the same physical attribute as water is the use of an “irreducible element” of magic, something the readers cannot explain according to the laws of the universe. The plot of “I Sell My Dreams” takes place in Havana, Cuba, and tells the peculiar occupation of a Colombian woman nicknamed Frau Frieda who makes her living by her ability to foretell the future through dreams. Frieda’s job obligation is “to decipher the family’s daily fate through her dreams” and all her predictions become “the sole authority in the house” so much so that even “the faintest sigh was breathed by her order” (65,66). In the story she foretells the death of her younger brother, warns the narrator of the possible danger, dreams of Pablo Neruda while he is dreaming of her and all of these predictions turn out to be true. Even the narrator himself believes Frieda’s magical prediction: “Even if your dreams are false, I’ll never go back . . . Just in case” (69). The events of these stories so enchant the readers that though they cannot explain those with their rational thinking, they willingly suspend their disbelief and accept that magical things may really happen. In such narrations the real or actual phenomena and events seem amazing or ridiculous and the unreal normal as Erik Camayd-Freixas says “natural appears strange, and the supernatural pedestrian” (qtd. in Faris 11). In “I Only Came to Use the Phone” Maria’s treatment being real seems strange and unreal. The realism, with which Marquez describes the prison, the guards, the doctors, and the young Maria, intensifies the nightmarish quality of the story, making Maria’s never-ending ordeal look as if she were a character in a fairy tale. Again, when one of the clerks in “The Saint” tells that in the previous year they “received more than eight hundred letters requesting sainthood for intact corpses” (Marquez 40), the magical happenings seem as if it were day to day experience.

The next feature of magical realism details in its description a strong presence of the phenomenal world and Faris identifies it as the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory (14). The realistic

descriptions of *Strange Pilgrims* create a fictional world that resembles the one people live in, often by extensive use of details. Almost all the events described in the stories are historically true. Marquez rewrites the history of Latin America in depicting the everyday details of the Latin Americans who, being exiled either forcefully or of their own volition, face much more complexities and “the strange things that happen to” (viii) them. About the authenticity of his stories Marquez writes: “For some two years I made notes on story subjects as they occurred to me” and “accumulated sixty-four ideas with so many detailed notes” (viii). All these stories are described in realistic details and, as Marquez writes, “based on journalistic facts” (ix). Immediately after giving clues to the events he enumerates those clues in journalistic details and makes the readers spellbound through his narration. This is why the supernatural present in the magical realist text does not disconcert the reader any more than it does the characters in the story because the readers are captivated by the author. The readers do not get any chance to question his narration of Frau Frieda and her ability to predict through dreams but go with him as to what happens next because the Second World War, Pablo Neruda, the huge wave to destroy the coastal areas are all real and historically true. “From a formal standpoint, however”, says Gene H. Bell-Villada, “the Neruda material gives the piece a stronger tie with reality: a flesh-and-blood poet sharing space with a professional dreamer-prophet” (148). “The Saint” realistically depicts Margarito’s life in Rome- comical sex episodes, street-prostitutes, the summer heat, and the procession of five popes from 1950s onwards. Marquez does not miss the opportunity to insert material from his own days in Rome as a late-twentyish enrollee at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinema and his teacher Cesare Zavattini (Bell-Villada 146). The action of “The Light Is Like Water” takes place sometime after 1972 and the house described in the story, Paseo de la Castellana, 47, is indeed an apartment building with a bank on the bottom floor (148). In “The Ghosts of August” the reported host and owner of the castle, the Venezuelan journalist and writer Miguel Otero Silva, really existed (1908-85) and was a presence in his native land’s print

culture (147). So it is seen that, as the magical happenings in magical realist fictions represent a clear departure from realism, to supplement the lack caused by this departure, a phenomenal world or the realistic historical evidences are added and these are well incorporated within the framework *Strange Pilgrims*.

A third quality of magical realism is that the readers hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events, and for this reason experience some unsettling doubts (Faris 17). The magical realist author, to create the illusion of the unreal, "pretends to escape from nature and recounts an action that, however explicable it may be, unsettles [the readers] with its strangeness" (Imbert 1). The unsettlement or hesitation is between the actual where an event is explainable according to the laws of the natural universe, and the marvelous, which requires some alteration in those laws. The question of belief is vital here. Alejo Carpentier opines that "the sensation of the 'marvelous' presupposes a faith. Those who do not believe in saints cannot be cured by the miracles of saints" (qtd. in Imbert 3). So, the belief systems differ, clearly, some readers in some cultures hesitate less than others, depending on their beliefs and narrative traditions. Owing to these differences in belief system, there appears an inherent clash of cultural systems between the one which believes in magical happenings and the other which believes in rational perspective. In such case, the readers are often literally instructed by the text to hesitate. The readers may hesitate firstly in doubt because they are unsure about the nature of the events and secondly, in wonder, in awe at their remarkable properties. In "The Saint", as referred to earlier, the narrator comes across Margarito whose daughter's corpse remains incorruptible eleven years after the funeral. The readers hesitate mainly on three grounds: whether the account the narrator describes are possible and therefore be true. This initiates the intensity of two others, more practical, speculations about whether the narrator actually witnesses the incident, and whether the description is fact or fiction. In "The Light Is Like Water" though the apartment building and aluminum boat are realistic elements, the light as water is the use of a

magical element which the readers being rational cannot accept as true. Similar happens to Frau Frieda's ability to predict in "I Sell My Dreams". Coming across the news of her demise, the readers hesitate for a moment and ask, having the ability to foretell other's fate, why cannot she foresee her own demise? "The Ghost of August" gives birth to the same hesitation and confuses the readers in the end. In "The Trail of Your Blood in the Snow" the author performs a small miracle. It has to it an almost fairy-tale quality. Despite its familiar settings and recognizable situations, two points are mysterious. The unnamed Parisian hospital is odd, Tuesday only being the date for visitors and the readers are never informed as to the actual medical reason for the girl's demise (Bell-Villada 156). Only in a book of fairy tale can a beautiful young heroine die of a prick from a thorn.

In magical realism, the readers experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds, the fourth aspect of magical realism (Faris 21). In such narration, the readers become captivated between the two worlds and this situation reminds certain aspects of contemporary or postmodern life since in postmodern era one does not know where he comes from and where he gets lost (21). As is evident earlier, magical realism juxtaposes real and unreal world, similarly, the magical realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds and reflects in both directions. Marquez's narration merges the two worlds and describes the incidents naturally, a technique which he achieved from his grandmother: "That's how my grandmother used to tell stories, the wildest things with a completely natural tone of voice" (qtd. in Vijh). So, ghosts and texts, or people and words that appears ghostly, inhabit these two directions. In "The Ghosts of August" the old woman informs the narrator that the castle he searches for is haunted and the host Otero Silva says that the ghost of Ludovico appears at midnight to find peace in his purgatory of love. The narrator's ghostly experience at the end of the story reminds the readers of this merging of real and surreal worlds. "I Only Came to Use the Phone" merges the familiar with the nightmarish in which Maria Cervantes goes through indescribable misfortunes. The dream, the

jealousies, the coincidences, all these events that are alien to the world of logic befalls to her as she is erroneously taken to a mental asylum. This theme of the familiar merging with the nightmarish is explored again in "The Trail of Your Blood in the Snow" where the world of reality and the world of miracle mix together. In "The Saint," except the incorruptibility of the corpse everything happens as part of reality and that episode of miraculous incorruptibility is merged with the everyday happenings of Margarito's twenty-two-year stay at Rome. In "I Sell My Dreams" Marquez merges the world of dream and that of reality in such dexterity that in spite of the marvelous dream episodes and the absurdity of the title, the readers end up accepting it as normal as the reading progresses. The ways in which these two-sided realities are presented in *Strange Pilgrims* blur the boundary between fact and fiction and merges these into a unified whole.

Lastly, apart from merging the two worlds, magical realist texts disturb the received ideas about time, space, and identity. It reorients not only people's habits of time and space but their sense of identity as well (Faris 23, 25). With regard to time, special consideration may be given to "The Saint" which, as the readers sense from the first page, begins with the narrator's accidental meeting with Margarito and then a very, very long flashback reveals the particulars of the protagonist's ventures. Time does not march forward from that meeting until the readers come across the last three paragraphs which describe the present. Similar technique is applied to "I Sell My Dreams" in which the narrator starts the story in present and then switches to the past; relates all the incidents pertaining to Frau Frieda and her predictions, and then moves back to the present. The narratives of "The Trail of your Blood in the Snow" and "I Only Came to Use the Phone" also shift time from present to the past reorienting people's conventional ideas of time. The readers wonder at how being dislocated in a new environment, Billy Avila, Nena Daconte's husband cannot attend her funeral despite staying close to her, while her parents do that from a great distance. Maria being accidentally dislocated to an asylum cannot make out how far she sleeps or how

much time passes through since her forced arrival at the asylum. In *Strange Pilgrims* Marquez's great shifts in the narrative's time sequence reflect a reality that is almost outside of time and he successfully does it to bind the incidents to form a unified whole. As per the reorientation of identity, Margarito's new found Roman identity from an Andean one is worth mentioning. When he first sees Margarito, the narrator "had trouble recognizing him, because he spoke halting Spanish and had the appearance of an old Roman" and "there was nothing left of the Andean intellectual's solemn manner" (Marquez 36) with which he first arrives at Rome. Similarly, a great number of characters experience dislocation and relocated identities. In all the stories of *Strange Pilgrims* the Latin American characters, being reoriented in a foreign land, face various complexities including identity crisis to cope with a strange environment. As regards the reorientation of space, each of the stories touches on the theme of dislocation, and the strangeness of life overseas. As Marquez asserts in the "Prologue" that he is "writing about the strange things that happen to Latin Americans in Europe" (viii) he successfully shows how being relocated in Geneva, Rome, Paris, Barcelona, Naples, Vienna, and other multi-ethnic cities packed with transients and tourists, his Latin American characters live in cheap hotels or pitiful lodgings and assemble with fellow nationals in a corner of the restaurants to chat and converse.

In *Strange Pilgrims*, with his captivating way of narration G. G. Marquez explores the strange things that happen to exiled Latin Americans who relentlessly struggle to survive on European soil. Though the stories of the collection vary in length and quality, in Marquez's charismatic narration they amalgamate realistic descriptions with fantastic elements so that the unreal happens as part of reality. The amalgamation takes place utilizing a certain mode of narrative which is widely known as magical realism. Magical realism is mainly a literary style or genre originating in Latin America that combines fantastic or dreamlike elements with realism. In *Strange Pilgrims* Marquez competently makes use of this narrative which blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality to create a

make believe world where everything is possible and believable. In doing so Marquez feels free to bring in the elements of dream, folk legends, fairy tale and the everyday experience which mixing up with journalistic notes attract, convince and seduce the readers. The unreal grows organically out of the ordinary in such naturalness that the readers become spellbound and cannot but believe that magical things really do happen. Because of its capacity to bridge the different realms, magical realism is regarded as an effective tool for the emerging literatures which develop and create masterpieces.

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