

# Blending of Fiction with Historical Reality in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the use of magic realism as a strategic tool in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Both the authors belong to two distinct continents; still, they have similar histories and stories of struggle. They develop a unique relationship while untangling reality. They create the mysterious relationship between the human beings and their circumstances in a way more realistic than the realist text. Also, the textual analysis reveals the basic goal of both the novelist to revisit their past through magic realism as both of them believe in the distortion of reality as outcome of colonial impact in their respective societies. In this sense, this paper justifies the rationale behind the blending of fiction and historical reality in both the novels. In doing so it explores how the unsayable in today's world of asymmetrical power and domination could be said through the use of tools and elements of magic realism such as hybridity, authorial presence, metafiction, awareness of mystery in a real world setting.

**Keywords:** Magic Realism, Fiction, Historical Reality, Identity, Postcoloniality, Metafiction

## Introduction

The internationalization of magical realist fiction in English in postcolonial context has brought into a contested debate on magic realism as a postcolonial strategic mode of writing. Stephen Slemon points out the binaries and dualities inherent in any text. As a mode of writing, magic realism looks for and delves into "gaps, absences and silences produced by the colonial encounter" (410). Slemon claims that magical realism's strength is in that it encodes "a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems" (410). He further clarifies, "Magical realism, at least in a literary context, seems most visibly operative in cultures situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions" (408). Slemon declares that magic realism works

as a discourse. For him, both magical and realist elements get equal access, though there is a continuous tension and resistance between them. Angel Flores does define magic realism in a similar manner with unique result as the blending of reality with fantasy, the “amalgamation of realism and fantasy” that flows from a narrative rich in “logical precision”(112-15). As he further states, “The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent literature from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms” (115-16) . Thus magic realism works as “. . . a tool in the search for a distinctive and positive Latin American identity in the face of external ideas of what this identity should be, in particular through a return to the myths and stories of Latin America” (Aldea 41).

*Midnight's Children* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are closely biblical in their structure: they are stories dealing with cultural creation and destruction. Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* describes his own endemic setting, Kashmir which quickly becomes too little for Dr. Aziz after he goes to Europe to become a doctor. Similarly, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Marquez describes an endemic Colombia untouched by infrastructure and new technology. At the end of the story, nature reclaims and destroys Macon do. But both the authors blend the everyday with the miraculous, the historical with the fabulous, and the psychological with the surreal. They envision the art of magic realism as a strategic tool in the postcolonial contexts. At the same time, they sound revolutionary because they point out a unique voice to India and Latin America respectively.

### **Rushdian Magic Realism**

*Midnight's Children* brings into discussion the Indian historical transition from British colonialism to independence and the partition of British India. By the use of magic realism, he vehemently rejects the British colonial versions of Indian story and constructs a *new* world with the unique Indian history, myth and magic. He skillfully manipulates the use of magic realism as an alternative way of approaching the truth. There are different examples and elements of preternatural, surreal, or otherwise magical happenings throughout the novel to express the original history and story. He portrays the postcolonial predicament by the strategic use of magic realism to depict the Indian multicultural identity that is full of myth, magic and legends.

The protagonist Saleem Sinai tells the story in the novel. He was born at midnight on 15 August 1947 at the same moment when India won its independence from British colonialism. He points out his miraculous birth tie with the fate of his nation, “. . . I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (3). He acts as a telepathic conduit, carrying out hundreds of geographically disparate children

into contact while also attempting to discover the meaning of their gifts. The presence of magic realism in the text carries the character of Tai with the claim of being great antiquity. Tai stubbornly claims of being so old that he has “watched the mountains being born” and “seen emperors die” (13). Tai’s use of the word “now” refers to the idea that he is making a comparison between the past which he trusts and the present which he hates. Rushdie makes use of Tai for representing the traditions of pre-colonial India.

The use of magic realism blends both myth and fantasy with real life. His brand of magic realism is characterized by an equal acceptance of the ordinary and the extraordinary. The narrative technique blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality. It fuses lyrical and at times, fantastic writing with an examination of the character of human existence and an implicit criticism of society, particularly the elite that Rushdie borrows the technique of storytelling from Indian folk tales and the epics. A next instance of magic realism that sticks out is the story of “The Hummingbird” in Mian Abdullah’s assassination.

But, there is a deliberate subversion of the purposes of folk tales and epics. Contrary to the predominantly moral and didactic concern of the creators of folk tales and epics, Rushdie appears to be amoral. Both folktales and epics make liberal attempt to entertain and to present a more complete and complicated vision of reality that merges out of the apparent unrealistic and unbelievable and often chaotic happenings. The truth value of incidents and characters of a world that blends fantasy and reality is not the primary concern of either the storyteller or the listener/reader. What becomes relevant is the underlying “truth” or “reality,” the images of which emerge from what they read or listen to. In Rushdie, what is real or unreal is often uncertain not only to the reader but also to the narrator himself. Alternatively, the real may have so many facets as to blur reality itself. In a vast country like India with an immense variety of life-experiences and with constant mingling of great and little traditions that have their own visions of reality, facts often get fictionalized, and truth often seems incredible.

Another element of fantasy found in Rushdie’s novel is the overt violation of what is accepted as possible or probable, and true or fact. For example, like the Puranic characters, Tai the eternal boatman is ageless:

“Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been plying this same boat, standing in the same hunched position across the Dal and Nageen Lakes” (10). In his poetic language, Rushdie describes the agelessness of and something of the eternal in Tai: “His lace was a sculpture of wind on water . . .” (10). At the same time, incredulity is neutralized by exaggerating what could have been partially true or factual.

An inversion of the elements of this world is a marked feature of fantasy. Rushdie resorts to this method in his novel very often. The midnight's children had mysterious magical powers. There is a deliberate attempt to subvert the conventions of realistic representation throughout the novel. Rushdie further points out:

It seems that the late summer of that year my grandfather, Doctor Aadam Aziz, contracted a highly dangerous form of optimism. He was by no means alone, because despite strenuous efforts by the authorities to stamp it out, this virulent disease had been breaking out all over India that year. (45)

This is obviously a reference to a real historical event, the Quit India movement in 1942. An attempt to reconstruct reality to produce strange and unfamiliar effect is made in the novel. Mian Abdullah's hum, "Could fall low enough to give you toothache and when it rose to the highest, more feverish pitch, it had the ability of inducing erections in anyone within its vicinity" (46). When assassins came to kill hummingbird Abdullah, ". . . his humming became higher and higher out of the range of our human ears, and was heard by the dogs of the town" (58). Through all these the unreality of the confusing, amorphous reality of our times is foregrounded. Fantasy serves as a time-tested device for doing so. In a tropical country like India, fantasy seems to be, as the narrator himself states, not an optional literary method, but an inevitable natural psychic process, of grappling with the truth and reality that seem to be forever fuzzy.

Rushdie's brand of magic realism is employed in the service of serious political reality. The author asserts that there never is a single, true reality but a multitude purported by an equal number of narrators. Every human being has his own version of truth, and an absolute universal reality is non-existent. Through Saleem, the novelist describes the continued struggle for identity in the polarities of the postcolonial. The children are seen as a hope of freedom for the whole nation. This freedom, in the end of the text is defined as "being now forever extinguished" as most of the midnight's children are now killed or sterilized. However, Rushdie points out that such a hope exists in every generation of midnight's children, who are the children of each successive era. Hence, he gives an open-ended conclusion to the novel:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who is not his until the thousand and first generation until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of

might's children to be the masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (647)

Thus, every generation of *Midnight's Children* represents a new hope for a nation to free itself from the chains of inability and create a unique identity only by ensuring freedom to its new rays of hope.

*Midnight's Children* weaves the magic realist tale of a newly born nation, its expectations, failures, and ultimate downfall with the Emergency, like a masterweaver. The story works in many levels. It can be read as a fantasy, a commentary on politics of the subcontinent or as an allegory of actual events. It is a bizarre mix, a cocktail of fantasy and history, where lot of actual events and people are interwoven to the narrative Saleem who possesses several supernatural abilities is never able to use them to the help of his nation. The story unfolds like an avalanche where small incidences trigger bigger ones which in turn cause bigger impacts.

The novel explores the ways in which history is given meaning through the retelling of individual experience. History is seen subjectively through the eyes of the protagonist Saleem Sinai, therefore the retelling of history is fragmented and, at times, erroneous. Rushdie is relating Saleem's generation of midnight's children to the generation of Indians with whom he was born and raised. As a product of postcolonial India, Saleem pieces together the multifarious fragments of his identity, just as India begins anew in rebuilding her identity in the wake of colonialism. Saleem's story represents the plural identities of India and the fragmented search for self through Memory.

There is another strange washerwoman Durga whose breasts are colossal and inexhaustible with a torrent of milk. Such incidents in the novel give a kind of dream like quality due to the mixing up of the real life with the fantastic elements. The novel, thus, remains a continuous and subtle investigation of the relations between order, reality and fantasy. The narrator Saleem constantly relates his life to that of his country India. His birth, growth, development and destruction are related to that of India. The other characters too seem to wander through the pages of history, colliding with important moments in the development of India seemingly by accident.

*Midnight's Children* brings out the events of history, myth, legends, fable, comedy, political satire, and magic elements within an imaginative and linguistic frame work. Magic and miracles are very much connected with people and folklore in general. Among the magic that falls into the local lore and the ancient system of belief are ghosts, superstitions and supernatural abilities. Ghosts are very common in magic realism since they unite the two worlds of life

and death and thus they serve to enlarge the space of intersection where magically some secret that they want to hide and the ghosts represent their guilty conscience. The tradition of the existence of ghosts is very strong in this environment and people sometimes see ghosts everywhere. They primarily have confidence in the mythology and legends and then they think logically. In this novel the mingling of the fantastic and ordinary, which is an aspect of magic realism seems Indian as the characters involved in contemporary political and social reality that possesses the power of mythic heroes. In the beginning of the novel there is a fine passage is an example for this mingling of the real and fantastic.

### **Marquezean Magic Realism**

Gabriel Garcia Marquez uses magic realism to reconstruct and rewrite the original history of Colombia. Marquez, with his imaginative style, combines realistic, everyday details with elements of fantasy, fairy tales, folk legends and stories of magic. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, he brings all these elements from the ancient culture of Latin America in order to make it lively with the everyday details. He drags the ancient folkloristic tradition and uses it as a powerful weapon to rewrite the history of Colombia. When Marquez insists that everything in his novel is ‘based on reality.’ They mean two things for him. First, that the most fantastic things have actually been believed or asserted by living people, and often in Latin America. “This doesn’t mean these things are true but it may make them real” (Wood 56) . Marquez, by bringing the incidents like the yellow butterflies trailing after one of the characters and Remedios, the beauty, takes off into the sky and getting vanished, borrows some dizzying pretext as his fictional reality and then puts the literal truth into his novel as an idle, misplaced speculation. The quite ordinary thus becomes fantastic.

Secondly, ‘based on reality,’ Marquez expresses guanine feelings hyperbolically and metaphorically. When Jose Arcadio Buendia dies, a rain of tiny yellow flower falls on Macondo, a ‘silent storm’ which covers the roofs, carpets the streets and suffocates the animals. This is a miracle even in “Macondo”- “the bits and pieces of legend for the end of a legendary character” (144). But the miracle affords the truth of a fitting image, the appropriateness of the imagination’s rising to the grand occasion as we feel nature ought to, but usually does not. The case of thousands of tiny flowers that almost bury the whole village also defies the common sense.

Going to such extremes is a typical feature of Marquez’s style:

They fell on the town all through the night in a silent storm, and they covered the roofs and blocked the doors and smothered the animals who slept outdoors. So many flowers fell from the sky

that in the mourning the streets were carpeted with a compact cushion and they had to clear them away with shovels and rakes so that the funeral procession could pass by. (144)

The ordinary phenomenon that is commonly associated with snow is being distorted here by mere exchange of snow for yellow flowers. This process of slight distortion of reality then invites the feeling of magical, supernatural experience. Thus yellow butterflies preceding Mauricio Babilonia's presence are another example of an ordinary thing taken to extreme. The butterflies, as well as yellow flowers, appear in extraordinary quantity that is only hard to believe.

Marquez is largely indebted to the socio-political history of Colombia employing magic realism in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. For example, the civil war between the Liberals and the Conservatives in the story directly echoes events similar to the historical events of Colombia. Michael Wood points out:

Colombia has a long tradition of democracy, The Liberals and the Conservatives, who dominated nineteenth and most of twentieth century politics, stood for quite different things - reform or reaction, free trade or protection, separation or conjunction of church and state and slowly turned into a rather narrow band of class interests. (8)

Based on this tragic historical event, a magnificent passage of magic realism is created by in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*:

It was as if the machine guns had been loaded with caps, because their panting rattle could be heard and their incandescent spitting could be seen, the panic became a dragon's tail as one compact wave ran against another which was moving in the opposite direction, toward the other dragon's tail in the street across the way, where the machine guns were also firing without cease. (311)

Colombia in the novel becomes a generic and celebrated Latin America, a place of innocence, isolation and magic, of high mountains, rainy tropics and ash-colored sea. However, internal wars, bureaucrats, booms, strikes, North American interventions and military rulers are also there. It is a sub-continent presented as carefully suspended between myth and history, and it proves how extensively Garcia Marquez mingled his real life experience with his fictions to mold the effects of magic realism. "At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world Incked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point" (I). But it comes to be learned that Ursula's great-great grandmother was alive when Sir Frances Drake attacked Rohacha, an actual event that took place in 1568. In real life this perception of time would be impossible. Obviously Sir

Frances Drake lived long after the world grew old enough for every object to have a name.

The arrival of Melquades and his gypsy band, with their navigational instruments, magnifying glass, and so forth, is a metaphor for the beginning of technical and scientific awareness in the town of Macondo. In this context, Marquez writes:

In March the gypsies returned. This time they brought a telescope and magnifying glass the size of a drum, which they exhibited as the latest discovery of the Jews of Amsterdam . . .

man will be able to see what is happening in any place in the world without leaving his own house. (3)

Meanwhile, Americans arrive in the prospering town of Macondo to farm bananas and the official governmental account of the event is accepted.

In real history, this is the period of the world-wide economic depression that began in 1929 and lasted a decade until the beginning of World War II. Within a short span of time Macondo is transformed from a crude rusticity to a wonderful modern town through the influences of technology, economic exploitation and foreign invasion. But the arrival of new machines and farming techniques do not make Macondo a better place to live. In fact, things only get worse instead of providing prosperity and order to the inhabitants of Macondo. Segundo has given up his job as the banana plantations foreman in order to give recognition to the workers. He draws public attention to the brutal working conditions of the plantation. The workers strike and Macondo is placed under martial law. The army, who favors the plantation owners, has started terrorizing the town. War, in fact, had broken out three months before Martial law was in effect in the whole country.

The only one who knew it immediately was Don Apolinar Moscote, but he did not give the news even to his wife while the army platoon that was to occupy the town by surprise was on its way. “They entered noiselessly before dawn, with two pieces of light artillery drawn by mules, and they set up their headquarters in the school dragged out Dr. Noguera, tied him to a tree in the square, and shot him without any due process of law “( 102). Commenting on the theme and episode of the banana plantation massacre, Paquet remarks:

The omniscient narrator’s tacit support for the unofficial versions of the massacre represented in the stories told by Jose Arcadio Segundo and the unnamed child makes the question of oral history unproblematic in outline, though often unreliable in specific detail for example in the discrepancy about the number of dead carried by the hallucinatory train. Curiously, Garcia



Marquez's fictional account has historically served as a reinserted into the official history of Colombia. (619)

There is a certain amount of irony in Garcia Marquez's proposal that modern technology and the pace of modern change confuse the villager's sense of reality. There is also a real political and historical message behind this reversal of expectations. Garcia Marquez is attempting to convey the extent of confusion that western industrial technology created in the lives of Latin Americans, whose minds were comfortable with the mythic and the supernatural, but for whom an adjustment to modern culture was extremely difficult that "the ultimate ability to perceive the schema of the cultural system in action" (Mossman 6).

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Marquez uses magical elements to create broader commentaries on the contemporary politics and societies in Latin America. He establishes an alternative reality which juxtaposes fantastical elements with equally mind-boggling realities, and even inverts them: the truth becomes fantasy, and the fantasy becomes truth. It is also infused with the language and science of progress: the automobile, the Banana Company, and so on. The paradox is that the supposed progress and modernity that is coming to Macondo also brings death and destruction: progress, in this sense, is actually a regression.

### **Conclusion**

Both Rushdie and Marquez present a world where fiction and history blend together. They employ magic realism to describe the difference between the two worlds or the attitudes towards them (considering the heroes' minds). Magic and miracle fit in the mythology and tradition of the eastern world and are presented in a matter-of-fact. This study explores Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* on how the main characters and their communities evolve, and how the impact of the outside world influences them and how the authors have used magical elements to create broader commentaries on the politics and societies in India and Latin America respectively. India and Latin America had been dominated by the various strains of colonization. They blend skillfully the everyday with the miraculous the historical with the fabulous, and the psychological with the surreal. They give a literary voice to India and Latin America and India respectively.

Magic is carefully juxtaposed with political and historical realities, and even for the characters it does not provide an escape. Rather, it provides a lens onto the social and political climate of the society that may not find adequate expression through traditional means. It calls into question the very nature of reality, what is believable and what is not. In short, magic realism cannot be

purely fantastical, because it does not allow the readers as an escape from the real world, but rather forces them to examine, perhaps from a different viewpoint, their perceptions of reality and truth much more closely. It is the artistic quality of these authors that the study of both the novels shows that they choose magic realism as a strategic tool to express their concerns over the traumatic the consequences caused by the colonizers in India and Latin America.

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