

A Comparative Study of Magic Realism in Works of Neil Gaiman and Angela Carter

Mahesh Chandra Tiwari

Ph.D. Research Scholar,

Department of English,

University of Lucknow,

Lucknow Uttar Pradesh, India

Email Id- maheshctiwari1@gmail.com

ORCID id- 0000-0003-4158-5490

Abstract

Since the release of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Magical Realism has been in favour as a narrative style or genre in adult fiction. The representation of the genre in children's and juvenile literature, on the other hand, is a recent trend; the components of the genre have been tracked and proven to be genuinely important in the interpretation of current children's fiction, such as David Almond's *Skelling* (1998). The aim of this paper is to look at the elements of magical realism in Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* works in this respect.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Fiction, Juvenile Literature, Supernatural

Introduction

Originally considered a Latin American phenomenon (Zamora and Faris 1995, 1), magical realism is obviously more prominent; indeed, it has gained global popularity in recent decades. It remains one of the most challenging literary forms or genres, despite its great popularity. The most common abstract, intuitive notion of the nature of magic realism is that it blends the magic with the real and brings astounding elements into the framework of the actual world. But since this also applies to many other types of literature, the idea is too wide and unclear to help with its definition. Amaryll Chanady, who claimed that any antinomy between these worlds is fixed because "the supernatural in magic realism is not presented as problems" but is "integrated within the norms of perception of storytellers and characters in the world of fiction" is one of the critics who tried to articulate the exact links between the magical and real (1985, 23). She believes that the magic "does not disconcert the reader" since they allegedly do not doubt the supernatural (24). In other words, the characters and narrator are not disturbed by the magic since it is portrayed as a regular part of their daily lives. This natural portrayal, according to Chanady, elicits a similarly natural reaction from readers: they are not disturbed by the supernatural since it is regarded as genuine inside the fictitious universe. Many contemporary magical realism theories still place a premium on the compatibility of the two fictitious worlds contained in a work of this style or genre.

However, if one adopts these criteria, one is forced to conclude that much current work that has been widely regarded as magical realism cannot be. Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, published in 1984, and Neil Gaiman's *Caroline* is the specific case this article is devoted to. The depiction of magic and the characters and the narrators' responses to it is barely natural in these books, and throughout the narrative, the tension, or antinomy, between the magic and the real remains as an essential part of the feminist aim of the author. However, most of the critics who wrote about the books think this is a classic example of magical realism. This assertion certainly appears to be founded more on intuition than on any strong theoretical basis. When South American magic realism reached Great Britain in the mid-eighties, "Carters; readers could allocate their jumbled fantasy-reality mix to an intelligible genre, thus feel more comfortable" (2000, 26).

Angela Carter

Angela Carter's book *Nights at the Circus* is situated at the border of the 19th century and divides it into three sections: London, St. Petersburg and Siberia. It is mainly recounted in the third person until in the third part, when the story passes between Fevvers, the third person's narrator and first-person. Fevvers is the main protagonist of this tale, even if we readers have only access to her thoughts towards the conclusion of the second section. Until then we can only view her as Walser does, since we follow him first in this tale. But once via him we get to know her better, the author lets us know her and shows how foolish we were. It fits within the postmodern, post-feminist and magic realistic genres.

The first part of the tale starts with Jack Walser, an American journalist, who talks to a world-renowned circus aerialist named Fevvers, known as the Cockney Venus. She should be the world's only half-human half-bird case, and he wants to create a novel about her existence. She tells him how she was raised up in the brothel, how she learned to fly, and how she was ultimately forced to be an exhibit in a kind of brothel of Freaks with her adopted mother and the former prostitute Lizzie. She was then sold to a religious lunatic who was trying to sacrifice her to his gods, but escaped and quickly after joining the circus, she got the global renown she likes today. This biography covers almost the whole of London. When fully completed, Fevvers and Walser are divided. But at this point, Walser is already fascinated with the bird lady, so he decides to pursue her, joining the circus as a clown and at the same time trying to find out if she's supernatural or just fraudulent.

Sometime has gone by at the beginning of the St. Petersburg segment, with characters already in Russia. Walser lives with an impoverished Russian lady and her grandson Ivan in what he clowns ally. Fevvers has no idea, and even if she sees him, his clown face painting does not instantly identify him. Carter does not utilise this portion so much for the Fevvers continuous study, but rather acquaints the reader with the other circus participants. We also meet Walser with a group of educated chimpanzees, with a chimp professor at their head, a silent tiger tamer called Princess of Abyssinia, Sampson, the strong man of the circus, and Colonel Kearney, the extravagant capitalist director, and Sybil, the silent but talented Mignon whom Walser saves from a tiger and helps to get rid of by both her husband's. We know a little more about the life of a circus, about the true sorrow of the clowns that may develop into insanity and the beginnings of love between Walser and Fevvers, and between the Princess of Abyssinia and Mignon. After Buffo the Great almost kills Walser, the chief clown is insane, the tiger attacks Mignon in the middle of the last show, and two life attempts are made, one by the charivari acrobatic family and the other by the egoist Grand Duke, the party is finally ready for Siberia and the last section of the library.

In the last part, the group is hugged on their journey across Siberia by fugitive criminals. Their train is wrecked, and the explosion has killed most artists and animals. The surviving, save Walser, are taken away. He subsequently found himself unhurt but suffering from provisional amnesia

by some of the women convicted and their guards who aided them to get out from jail. They revive him and offer him some food, but they abandon him when a whistle is heard in the distance. He is thus left to wander, he finally comes across a shaman who takes him into his home and begins to educate him to be a shaman. Meanwhile, the remainder of the survivors are detained until the captors are told that, due to false rumours, Fevvers, who they hoped would help them regain their status, can do nothing for them. The outlaws are weeping, the clowns are doing for them, but unexpected snowstorm in the midst of their performance, they take everyone, save Fevvers, Lizzie, Sampson, Mignon, Princess, Colonel and his pig. They did not know what other things to do. They went off to seek for a civilization accompanied by a Russian escapist whom they met when they were being arrested as their guide. Fevvers looks at Walser again and resolves to search for him in the company of Lizzie, leaving the rest behind. The loss of his memory also caused the obliteration of his biases against women, and in particular his previous prejudice towards Fevvers, whom he regarded solely in advance as an object. Both of them are reconciled, eventually equally in their eyes, concluding the book by entering jointly into the next century.

Magic Realism Elements in Nights at the Circus

The very first words of the book already show magical realism throughout the whole novel and put the narrative in this path. By portraying the otherworldly happenings in Fevvers' history as genuine, they dictate the overall tone:

Lor' love you, sir! "Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids". As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky old London, didn't I! Not billed the 'Cockney Venus', for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me 'Helen of the High Wire', due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore -- for I never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched.

"Hatched out of a bloody great egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is!" (Carter: 5)

Fevvers speaks about her beginnings precisely as the tale, here, and in her subsequent biography, she portrays it as a reality. These truths are true and occur, whether we believe them or not. No matter how impossible and unpleasant they seem, no matter how fable-like they sound, they are explained, exactly, in the matter of fact, and this is one of the most important characteristics of magic realism.

The viewer is confronted with her picture, an image of a bird lady with wings, immediately after these initial words spoken by the protagonist. She is regarded as this picture as a kind of wonderful actuality, but not least as a reality. She's there; she's there, but not anything every day. The book's second protagonist, the American journalist Jack Walser, is a figure that verifies this wonderful truth in particular. He is the voice of reason and reflects on its supernaturality from a logical viewpoint, especially at the beginning of the book, when his ideas are still not tamed with magical thinking; "Now, wings without arms is one impossible thing; but wings with arms is the impossible made doubly unlikely -- the impossible squared" (Carter: 15-16).

Fevvers' logical thinking, on the other hand, gradually fades as the narrative continues. He progressively permits mystical aspects to enter his consciousness without explanation, and as a consequence, he and the readers begin to question the aerialist's tale. This issue of Fevvers' wings therefore stays unanswered until the very end, especially because she makes us rethink what we have previously accepted throughout the book with her final words, "To think I really fooled you!" she marvelled. "It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence" (Carter: 295).

Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman has a reputation for delighting both adults and children with his creative and sometimes frightening tales. Despite the presence of supernatural elements, Gaiman's stories are usually set in the real world. *Coraline* (2002), which won Hugo and Nebula awards, is a great example of such works. Coraline Jones is a preadolescent girl who just moved to a big old house with her family. Coraline, who loves exploring new areas, once visited the flat next door and encountered a terrible creature intent on keeping her there indefinitely. The young heroine eventually overcomes the Beldam and goes home. David Rudd and Karen Coats, both critics of children's literature, have complimented the book. In *An Eye for an Eye* (2008), which takes a psychological perspective, Rudd analysis the novel using Freud's concept of the Uncanny, Lacan's Symbolic and Real, and Kristeva's concept of the abject. "A profound and powerful work that addresses topics that many people deem inappropriate for children," he says of *Coraline* (161). According to him, the tale's significance stems from its link to the child's place in the universe.

In contrast, Coats' article *Between Horror, Humour, and Hope* (2008) focuses on the Gothic elements shown in Gaiman's writing, particularly in *Coraline*, suggesting that such characteristics would help the child "cope with [...] traumas in an indirect manner" (77). The majority of comparable studies analyse the book thematically and psychologically, similar to Michael Howarth's *Under the Bed Creeping* (2007), Saravia Vargas' *A Girl in the Dark with Monsters* (2014), and Emma Agnell's "When the Cat Is Away, the Mother Will Play." All of the aforementioned studies, as well as others like them, analyse the novel as a work of fiction. In *Eye Other Mother: Neil Gaiman's Postfeminist Fairytales*, Parsons, Sawers, and McNally contend that the book belongs to *The genre of fantasy* (2008). *Something Very Old and Very Slow: Coraline, Uncanniness, and Narrative Form* (2008) by Richard Gooding claims that the novel is written for two audiences, focusing on Sigmund Freud's formulation of "a cultural insight into the relationship between the uncanny and fantasy literature" and suggesting that Gaiman's use of the uncanny leads readers to draw a line between the real and the fantastic (3, 392). He also cites Todorov's notion of the eerie, according to which the observer may detect a boundary between the real and the magical worlds. As a consequence, the supernatural occurrence in the story is largely "anticipated in a hallucinating episode happening late at night," as Gooding says, separating the events from reality (393).

Magic Realism Elements in Coraline

Coraline starts with an epigraph from G. K. Chesterton – "Fairy tales are more than true: they teach us that dragons can be defeated, not because they inform us that dragons exist" (9) – as if to persuade readers to accept his story as realistic fiction. In this context, Faris' five magical realist qualities – the presence of irreducible elements, detailed description of the phenomenal world, the experience of unsettling doubts, the merging of worlds, and finally the disruption of conventional concepts of time, space, and identity (7) – may best endorse this invitation.

Coraline is brimming with magical aspects, and the plot depicts the interaction between the actual world and the fantastical realm. The young heroine is surrounded by magic in the story's very real world, including elderly actors who can predict future events and hold a magical item, as well as singing mice and a smart helpful cat. However, the existence of the first element is mainly exemplified by the character of the other mother, according to Faris' list of major features of magical realism. Coraline wants a more adventurous life since she is tired of her busy parents who do not offer her the attention and affection she deserves. Her desire seems to have been fulfilled when she discovered the bricked entrance and entered the amazing realm where, she meets the other mother, who seems to be a close relative of Coraline's own;

It sounded like her mum was speaking... She resembled her mother in appearance. Her skin, though, was as white as paper. She was just taller and slimmer. Her fingers were the only

thing that were excessively long... Her dark-red fingernails were curled and pointed, and she had dark-red fingernails... Her eyes were the size of large black buttons. (34)

Despite the fact that the other mother creates the world and almost everything in the flat next door, no explanation is provided as to the nature of her genesis, the beldam, or the location (4). These are the questions that both Coraline and her readers have; yet, there is no answer for them, or rather, no need to look for one, since the presence of the other mother might be as natural as Coraline's origin.

Another unexplained element of the story is the spirits of three children imprisoned by the other mother, which deepens the link between two opposing realms. Gaiman's work uses the topic and presents some child ghosts to young readers, similar to adult fiction such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), in which the soul of a murdered child haunts the house. As a consequence, portraying the supernatural in a matter-of-fact manner is one of the characteristics of magical realism narrative, allowing both the heroine and the audience to accept the existence of ghosts without being startled.

Fantasy has undoubtedly been a persistent and recurrent subject in Neil Gaiman's work. It is the "ultimately philosophic genre of fiction, providing space to man's deepest aspirations and most powerful thoughts," according to the author (Prickett xv). Fantasy is discussed throughout Gaiman's writings in the shape of dreams, visions, and the construction of other worlds. On the other hand, it serves as an essential instrument for addressing the unseen experience that Gaiman's characters go through. Gaiman's fantasy has a global appeal in terms of audience since it may appeal to a wide range of readers and is suitable for all ages.

Gaiman's books are structured in the bildungsroman style. The use of the term bildungsroman has an underlying connection with the idea of self. His characters' steady growth and maturation remember every detail of their experiences, from the inner to the outside plane of consciousness. The bildungsroman's incorporation in the fantastic tale creates a reservoir of familiarity that goes beyond mere escapism to knowledge of a bigger character's psychology. The use of bildungsroman, which ultimately locates his works as a quest fantasy book, demonstrates the symbolic character of their evolving relationships with their environment. The strange grandeur of desire and the extraordinary that has become commonplace stands out in the research. Furthermore, Gaiman's tales progressively dislodge the conventional picture of the kid via the use of bildungsroman. It has resulted in the birth of a kid who has developed a mystical notion of selfhood. Characters are given the chance to express their anxieties, anger, unmet promises, and lasting feeling of exile and loss via the use of bildungsroman, even if they seem to be reunited in their familiar surroundings. On the other side, it includes the difficult journey that comes with establishing one's selfhood, and it serves as an essential component of the characters' path to liberation, achieving a resonant and spontaneous expressive dignity.

Story telling technique is employed by Neil Gaiman and his writings embark on the politics of power inherent in the act of storytelling. The act of storytelling which is discernible in his works celebrates the transparency of orality. On the other hand, storytelling signifies the act of representing the past in order to comprehend the present context. Frequently in his narrative, the collective memory and consciousness of the characters are altered through the act of storytelling technique, which gives space for alternative options. Most importantly, storytelling in Gaiman's works functions as a credential of selfhood.

The intersection of truth and fantasy in Neil Gaiman's writings has discredited reality's dominating beliefs. In his writings, the presence of ghosts, giants, and other supernatural figures reflects the potential of transformation and allows the author to investigate the subjective aspect of reality. The research takes a look at realism and imagination in the modernist and postmodernist

periods. The research also looked at the notion of liminality. The liminal zone emphasised in Neil Gaiman's writings further rejects the conventional notion of reality. The characters' perception of the relativity between imagination and reality is aided by the liminal zone. It is a crucial stage in psychological development, particularly when the young characters are destined for estrangement and inner anguish.

Furthermore, the tales are enhanced by the presence of magical realism, Gothic themes, and dreams. His narrative style engrosses the audience and delves into their collective memories. Gaiman's tales use narrative to give the reader a feeling of both the present and the past.

The fantastic encompasses Gothic, magical realism, and the surreal, all of which combine to create the impossible. Fantasy is at the heart of Gaiman's storyline and narrative, allowing the characters to consider their options. Simultaneously, Gaiman's fantastic tales have outstripped traditional forms of life observation because fantasy serves an essential purpose as a kind of resistance. Although the amazing story seems to be deceiving, it works in the lives of ordinary people, and the unexpected allows for a period of quiet distance. As the narrative of his book develops, the meaning of fantasy becomes more complicated. It transforms into the forces that have decided the characters' fates and is raised to the status of essential elements that cannot be achieved by reason and logic.

Conclusion

Magical realism is a relatively new literary genre, but it is none the less fast growing in popularity as it is used in many a successful novel. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* are clear example of such a work, encompassing all the main magically realistic characteristics. It incorporates magical elements into the realistic atmosphere as if they were a part of it, it shows the contrast between the rationality of the West and the spirituality of the East, political and social critique of patriarchal community is integrated into the stories. The author provides us with a plenitude of disorienting details, thus creating more than one possible way of interpretation. Authorial reticence is observed as the credibility of the world is never clearly stated and not all confusing elements are explained, so the readers are allowed to choose their own interpretation, as long as they distance themselves from all conventional structures. All these characteristics clearly put Carter's and Gaiman's work among those of magical realism, and the refined incorporation of these characteristics into the story proves it belongs to the very top of the genre.

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