AN ANALYSIS OF MAGIC REALISM IN *MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN* (SALMAN RUSHDIE) AND *THE FAMISHED ROAD* (BEN OKRI)

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Statement of Originality

The work described in this Final Year Project, entitled “An Analysis of Magic realism in Midnight’s Children (Salman Rushdie) and The Famished Road (Ben Okri)” is to the best of the author’s knowledge that of the author except where due reference is made.

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AN ANALYSIS OF MAGIC REALISM IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN
(SALMAN RUSHDIE) AND THE FAMISHED ROAD (BEN OKRI)

Faridatul Mastura bt. Mohamed Khatib

This study aims to analyze magic realism in which the foci are to examine the characteristics of magic realism as listed by Faris (1998) and the usage of magic realism by the authors in emphasizing the effects of colonization. The texts used are Midnight’s Children and The Famished Road; written by magic realist writers; Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri. Data collection is done through literature research using the theoretical framework of magic realism. The theoretical framework of magic realism is a combination of the poetics of magic realism by Faris (1998) and cultural theory by Jacobsen (2005). The result of this study shows that magic realism has its effects on colonization and magic realism is perceived as decolonizing device. The findings of this study bridge the existing knowledge gap noted from related previous studies.
ABSTRAK

ANALISIS REALISM MAGIS DALAM MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN
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Faridatul Mastura bt. Mohamed Khatib

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.0 Preview

This section of the paper will provide a discussion of the background of the study that is a background of magic realism followed by the statement of the research problem and its focal point. This section also discusses the significance and scope of the study. Operational definitions of terms are included as well to help other researcher in understanding the scope of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

The mode of magic realism offers an imaginative and effective means of showing the “real” living experiences. Literary works are drawn upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folktale. In formerly colonized countries several ‘schools’ of literature emerged which attempted to combine the old realistic tradition
with elements variously referred to as the supernatural or magic. An example of this type of writing in recent years has been Ben Okri whose *The Famished Road* (1991) explicitly grouped into the tradition of Yoruba. The story lies not in the description of supernatural characters or a fantastic world setting, but in the fusion of a realistic setting of a modern world with a magical dream world, which is, especially in African culture, an important part of everyday life.

While in the Americas, magic realism has been linked to indigenous that is, world views deeply steeped in the myths and legends of cultures with a ritualistic-religious foundation (Walter 64). Through the indigenous belief systems, the writer re-creates the cultural practices that totally differ from Western paradigms. Allen (qty. in Walter 64) argues that the harmonious relation of human, natural and cosmic spheres “is the power that enables magical things to happen” such as

- transformation of objects from one form to another,
- movement of objects from one place to another by teleportation,
- the curing of the sick (and conversely creating sickness in people, animals or plants),
- communication with animals, plants and nonphysical beings,
- the compelling of the will of another, and
- the stealing or storing of souls.

The interwoven between natural and supernatural has made magic realism stand on its own. Many people think that magic realism stories are not much differ from other stories such as the gothic stories. However this is a wrong perception that must be corrected. In comparison, gothic story is created based on human’s imagination and the setting of the story is normally created to give such an eerie mode or feeling. For magic realism, ghost is accepted into real life and unquestionable. Writer such as Ben Okri is popular with the use of spirit child in her works, namely *A Prayer for the Living* and *The Famished Road*. 
The techniques of magic realism give the author a platform to express opinions, political views and criticism on real life and explicitly. As Faris states magical realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that the magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed (165). There is always a space to comment on the clash of different cultures and the inequality of political, economic or social power. Magic realist writer apply different rules to the world of fiction, but still represent them in a realistic way. They make the reader believes in the story as a matter-of-fact. In their story, the strangeness becomes familiar; the magical becomes real and the dead become alive. Hence, once the character accepts the magic, the reader will tend to follow automatically. The magical always has its legitimate place and is never questioned by the characters.

1.2 Statements of Problem

Since being coined by the German Art historian Franz Roh in 1920s, the concept of magic realism has been the focus of many literary studies. Most critics agree upon the fact that magic realism is an oxymoron combining natural and supernatural categories of reality.

In many years, magic realism has been associated with Latin American literature. It becomes a phenomenon after the publication of Gabriel Garcia Marquez *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Thereafter, it is widely used as technique in writing worldwide. However, in recent years, it has gained validity as a critical tool in other literature as well. Many critiques have been done about magic realism but not much research has been done in observing the actual function of magic realism and its characteristics. This situation has lead to the problem statement of this study which is to find out how magic realism is used to accept paradoxical events as normal phenomena in everyday life.
Moreover, magic realism can not be taken for granted as it served a crucial role especially in presenting controversial issues in postcolonial societies that have gained independence from colonies. For example, the author present the struggles encounter by the country which are not written in history.

Therefore, this research focuses on literature that portrays the magic realism in everyday life. It is important to find out how magic realism connected to the effects of colonization in novels written by Ben Okri’s, The Famished Road and Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children.

1.3 Objectives of the Study
The research objectives of this study are:

1. To examine characteristic of the magic realism in The Famished Road by Ben Okri and Midnight’s Children by Salman Rushdie.
2. To examine how magic realism is used by the authors to emphasize on the effect of colonization.

1.4 Research Questions
Corresponding to the objectives of the research are four research questions:

1. What are the characteristics that the writers employed in their novels?
2. How are the imitations of colonization portrayed in the novels and how it related to magic realism?

1.5 Significance of the Study

There are many studies done on the use of magic realism as the narration technique and devices to portray the post-colonial and postmodern days, however only few are done, only concentrate on magic realism as their subject. Therefore, this
research will hopefully make a contribution in closing the gap of familiarity in literature concerning the use of magic realism as suggested by its definition.

In addition, it is hoped that the result obtained from this research will be useful as it adds to the body of magic realism research by presenting aspects which may have not been thoroughly covered in previous literary studies. The finding would also serve as a guide or insight for future studies on magic realism in contemporary novels.

Furthermore, this research attempted to discover the use of magic realism in everyday life and its effects on colonization. There are three aspects of colonization that will be highlighted, namely, hybridity, mimicry and orientalism. The result of this research hopes to serve rich information about its usage and effects in postcolonial fiction.

In West, magic realism has received its recognition as a subject in most Literature course in both school and university level. Many literary works has been published under this genre. Compared to our country, only small number of Malaysian writers’ such as K.S Maniam and Rani Manicka are recognized to use magic realism in their novels. Therefore, this study can be used as a reference or guideline in introducing magic realism in Malaysian’s literature.

1.6 Operational Definition of Terms

1.6.1 Magic(al) realism

Magic realism interwoven both physical realities and psychological as one. It is “real” because it takes place in the real world and “magic” because it incorporates dreams, fantasies, and emotions as part of the real world. Time exists in a kind
of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality. Once the reader accepts
the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision (Flores 113).

### 1.6.2 Characteristics of magic realism

The characteristics of magic realism that will be examined from the selected
texts are based on the Faris’s list of primary and secondary characteristics of magic
realism (163-190). There are five primary and four secondary characteristic that the
researcher have chosen from the original characteristics to fit into the study. The
primary characteristics are (i) irreducible element of magic, (ii) strong presence of
realism, (iii) hesitation, (iv) the closeness or near-merging of two worlds and (v) time,
space and identity. While the secondary characteristics are (i) metafictional
dimension, (ii) narratives are fresh, (iii) repetitions and (iv) political and anti-
bureaucratic.

### 1.6.3 Definition of Hybridity

Hybridity usually defined as “the creation of new transcultural forms within
the contact zone produced by colonisation” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2003). It
takes many forms including cultural, political and linguistic.

### 1.6.4 Definition of Orientalism

The East has been defined by the West in terms of its nature as non-West, what he calls ‘the Other’. Through the definition, the East is always seen as bad while
the West is the good. Said states that “orientalism was a library or archive of
information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held. What bound
the archive together were a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in
various ways to be effective”  (Said 41-42).
1.6.5 Definition of Mimicry

Mimicry is a sign of mockery. The menace of mimicry is its double vision which reveals the ambivalence of colonial discourse thus disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what Bhabha described as the partial representation of the colonial object (88). Mimicry is, then, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which "appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power”.

1.7 Scope of the Study

In this study, the researcher will use two novels namely The Famished Road by Ben Okri and Midnight’s Children by Salman Rushdie. These novels are selected as they provide rich resources for the researcher to analyze the characteristics of magic realism used in everyday life. The researcher also looked for the existence of magic realism and how the authors use it in order to emphasize the effects of colonization. In that case, both texts which are the postcolonial fiction granted the evidence of imitation of colonization and therefore covered the aspects of colonization that the researcher intent to study. The aspects of colonization that the researcher intended to cover are orientalism, hybridity and mimicry.

Both novels are categorized as contemporary novel, thus, it is beyond this study to discuss about the existence of magic realism during the Latin America movement. It is also not the intention of the research to select novels to represent any particular literary movement.

1.8 Chapter review

This chapter deals with the background of the magic realism from the early day which provides the background of the study. It also describes the objectives of the research which is to be carried out as proposed in this paper and also
corresponding questions to the research objectives. Definitions of the operational terms are also included to provide clarity on the concept focused in this paper. Chapter 2 will discuss magic realism based on related literary studies in further detail.
2.0 Preview

This chapter is a collective of the past researches on the magic realism. Different perspectives of magic realism will be discussed throughout this chapter. The basis of magic realism is provided to give a further insight about the discussion, followed by the differences between magic realism with the mundane. This chapter also covers the theoretical framework of magic realism which comprises of the characteristics of magic realism and the politics of magic realism. In addition, it discusses about magic realism in literature as a whole. Finally, a summary on all the literature reviewed is provided to depict the overall meaning of this chapter.
2.1 Magic Realism

The term “magic realism” was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magic realism an art category. To him, it was a way of representing and responding to reality and representing the mystery of reality in pictures. The term magic realism made its way to the literary genre in the 1930s, when the works of Latin American novelists and short story writers were recognized in a new trend – ‘magical realism’. It was a way to express the realistic American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature and it seizes the irony in the union of opposites.

Flores has pointed out that 1935 is the starting point of magic realism in literature with its golden age occurring between 1940 and 1950 (110). Magic realism of Spanish and Latin American has attributed to the social, political and European influence. He also remarked that Jorge Luis Borges’ work, *A Universal History of Infamy* marks the birth of magic realism. Borges’ works are similar to the works of Kafka, *Metamorphoses*. Their works reflect a combination of realism and fantasy. Before the greatness of magic realism was realized, it was thought that Spanish and Latin American fiction could not produce anything beyond simple works. However, times have changed, a wealth of great works and attributes are derived from Latin American culture and its writing.

In Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, the emergence of the so-called ‘boom’ period in literature was aroused with the writers such as Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. They were united in their determination to find a Latin America mode of expression rather than look to Europe for readily available literary authority. This phenomenon had created a stream of texts labeled “magical realist” emerging from Latin America. Herman observes about magic realism in his work *Concepts of Realism*:
Magic realism is a literary mode that has received a variety of (overlapping) definitions. Due to the boom of Latin America fiction in the 1960s, for which the formulation was used as a cover term, it has become so popular as marketing label that it has turned into problematic or even dangerous critical tool (122).

Although magic realism narratives have long been limited to the region of South America, nowadays, it covers various texts from different cultural traditions from Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and Australia, in addition to those from Latin America. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison and Sherman Alexie are among magic realist writer who employed magic realism in their writing.

2.2 Differences between the Magic and the Ordinary

Magic realist story from around the world can vary greatly in tone, context and content. However, they share some common elements. Elements of the magical and the mundane are interwoven seamlessly, making it impossible to determine where reality ends and the extraordinary begins.

Magic realism cannot be identified either with fantastic literature or with psychological literature, or with the surrealist or hermetic literature (Leal 119). Due to the fact magic realism is neither of the above; it cannot be identified as fantastic literature or science fiction. Cooper argues that “magical realism thrives on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity” (15). The two worlds, reality and fantasy, however, are not separated but they exist in the narrative and are accepted by its characters. The reader, therefore, does not question the strangeness but they accepted them as a matter of fact. The difference of magic realism to other fiction (like science fiction, fantasy, horror) is that the stress in the former is not on the description of the magical as something unreal, strange or unreasonable, but in the
characters’ acceptance of the way the world functions without doubting or questioning. Objects and settings in the story may take on lives of their own in a way that is ordinary to the characters in the story.

Bowers claims that “magical realism relies upon the presentation of real, imagined or magical elements as if they were real” (22). Magics occur without using devices typical to the fantasy genre unless the devices such as ghosts or angels are employed in a context that makes them ordinary. Ghosts or angels may exist in a magical realist story but in a way that is normal to the characters in the book. The ordinary aspects of the story are what produce the utmost magic. By describing the ordinary in extraordinary terms, the extraordinary events that occur do not stand out as unnatural. This is probably less a confidence deception on the part of the narrators, and more a result of an individual worldviews they hold.

As noted by Danow (qty. in Wenger 133), those who read magical realism are thus “rewarded with a perspective on the world that still includes much that has elsewhere been lost” (67). Magic realism enables the reader to seek the standard set by the characters while at the same time not feeling that they are entirely out of reach. Dealing with cultural issues through magical realism adds a dreamlike quality to the violence, corruption, and poverty, making it more pleasant.

The techniques of magic realism can, potentially, give a writer the best of both worlds. Through magical events, writers can find new viewpoints; construct new metaphors through which to view the world. Meanwhile, through the realistic world in which these magical events occur, the stories stay immediate, intimate. Works of magic realism are not mere fantasies that can be dismissed as works of escapism, but they refuse to be bound by the restrictions of ‘real life’ and hence provide new ways of writing and thinking.
2.3 **Characteristics of Magic Realism**

“Magical realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that the magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed”.

(Faris 169)

Defining magic realism is problematic as defining its characteristics. There are no perfect characteristics that best defining the magic realism. Theorist and magic realist have their own view about magic realism. Its only can be seen as collective characteristics that come from different perspectives since both postmodern and postcolonial claimed that magic realism as technique of writing in their era.

Faris, in her article *Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism in Postmodernist Fiction* (1998) writes about the characteristics of magic realism and composes a checklist of textual requirements for magic realism. In her article, Faris has listed five primary and nine secondary characteristics of magic realism. Faris also claimed these characteristics that she has listed are what the text in the field of magic realism tends to have. The characteristics are:

**2.3.1 Irreducible element of magic**

Irreducible magic often means disruption of the ordinary logic cause and effect. The supernatural element has to be real and not exaggeration on the part of the narrator, or a figment of his/her imagination. For example, an ability to stop the time is an irreducible element magic.

**2.3.2 Strong presence of realism**

In order to enhance the sense of realism, there are tendencies in emphasizing on historical anchoring. For example, *Lempriere’s*
Dictionary by Lawrence Norfolk’s is a novel that is firmly anchored in history as most of its characters are recognizable from history and because in general, there seems to be an almost hysterical attention to historical attention (qty. in Jacobsen 26).

2.3.3 Hesitation
The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events and hence experiences some unsettling doubt. Some readers in some cultures will hesitate less than others. In most cases, the readers hesitate when they tried to understand an event as a character’s hallucination or as a miracle.

2.3.4 The closeness or near-merging of two worlds
The merging of the two-worlds leaves the reader in a timeless stance, where life and death co-exist. On one side, the national world-view in a real modern setting including authentic description of human being while on the other side, the supernatural, magical and mystical. Duerr says that in many of the texts “perhaps you are aware that seeing take place only if you smuggle yourself in between worlds, the worlds of ordinary people and that of the witches” (qty. in Faris 172).

2.3.5 Time, space and identity
Magic realism tends to engage the themes of time, space and identity. These three themes are commonly found in the postmodern and postcolonial perspectives. In post-colonial perspective, most of the works are about identity and space. While from the postmodern perspective will often deal with the notion of space, particularly when it comes to the space of the fiction (qty. in Jacobsen 27).