

Narrative Mode and Fiction
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Lecture - 56
Magical Realism IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on narrative mode and fiction. We are discussing magical realism. So this is a continuation from where we stopped last time. We are looking at the different features of magical realism as a genre, as a form that is very much, you know, an offshoot of the postmodern conditions, postmodern artwork.

(refer time: 00:57) So the real experiences, the closeness or near merging of two realms of two worlds. So following H. P. Duerr in *Dreamtime*, one might say that, in many magical realist works, to quote Duerr, “perhaps you are aware that seeing takes place only if you smuggle yourself in between worlds, the world of ordinary people and that of the witches.” (unquote).

So the magical realist vision exists at the intersection of these two worlds, at an imaginary point, inside a kind of double-edged mirror that reflects both these directions, that is capable of grasping both these.. both these meanings. So fluid boundaries between the world of the living and that of the dead are traced, only to be crossed.

So once we understand this boundary, the fluid boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead, the expectation from a reader is that to transcend the liminal and be able to flow with the narrative. Such is happening in texts, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Midnight’s Children*, *That Voice*, *Distant Relations*, *The White Hotel*, and *Ironweed*.

So if fiction is exhausted, in this world, then the magical realist texts create another continuous world in which fiction can spill over, right? So in a way, the boundary that I was talking about, the liminality between this world and that world, that state is transcended, and the reader in a sense continues life beyond the realms of life, the scope of life, in the realm of death. (refer time: 03:10)

So another related boundary that ought to be blurred is that between the fact and the fiction. According to Brian McHale, magical realism is at the heart of this modern writing. In a chapter titled *A World Next Door*, McHale explores the generalized effect of a fantastic change, which seems to be diffused in all postmodernist writing.

McHale claims that the hesitation in traditional fantastic writing between this world and the next world has been displaced, I quote him, “the confrontation between different ontological levels in the structure of texts” in magical realist works. (refer time: 04:10) So moving on to the next feature of magical realism, magical realist fictions question any kind of received ideas about time, about time, space and identity. So to quote from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, “four years, eleven months, and two days” of rain and an insomnia plague that erases the past and hence the meaning of words. A room in which it is “always March and always Monday.”

Jose Arcadio who languishes half-dead and half-alive for years under a banana tree in the courtyard of his house, and a final whirlwind that abolishes a race’s second opportunity on earth. Through all these instances in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, our sense of time is literally shaken and we have to understand time and temporality afresh, anew.

So our sense of space is similarly challenged when one finds tropical plants growing over the Paris automobile club’s pool in *Distant Relations*. So it defies any kind of naturalness. In this context, I would also like to bring in the discussion on map and map-making, which is seen as a crazy project both by Borges and by BAUDRILLARD (05:47).

So they are postmodernist, and they say that the colonizer's project of knowing everything about the colony, being able to extensively and intensively cover the length and breadth of the colony through the map, to the extent that the map precedes the territory, the map becomes a simulacrum, without a referent, the original referent. There is a lot of epistemic violence associated with this kind of mapmaking.

There is a.. there is power and hegemony at play. As a way of defying this, we find Robert Kroetch’s writing in *What the Crow Said*, at one point towards the beginning - neither here nor there, you know, so defying any kind of mapmaking on the indigenous people. So the map of the white man cannot locate, identify, understand, and lay out everything about the indigenous existence.

The alternative existence that Kroetch talks about in *What the Crow Said*, flies out of, evaporates from the white man’s enterprise of map-making. Our sense of space, like I was saying, and time are therefore both jolted, both shaken by the genre of magical realism. As Fredric Jameson sets out the project of realism, one thing it achieves is, to quote Jameson, “the emergence of a new space and a new temporality” (unquote). Its spatial homogeneity abolishes the older forms of sacred space.

Likewise, the newly measuring clock and measurable routine replace older forms of rituals, sacred and cyclical time. So with Renaissance, with science and technology, we have notion of a time that can be measured, a space that can be quantified. This is where realism is basically coming from, the uniform clock, like the Big Ben, the calendrical time.

So we have a... we can quantify time, how much time has elapsed. It could be four days or four months, but the magical realism and postmodernism plays with both these things. Time can be shrunk or where one year passes at the blink of eye and one minute stays forever. (refer time: 08:46)

So there is an erosion of Jameson's description, by magical realist works and by modern and postmodern works. Many magical realist fictions, just like the 19th Century Gothic predecessors, carefully delineate the sacred enclosures, such as Aura's house, Macondo (a fictional place), Saleem's pickle factory and pickle jars, Branly's house, Baby Suggs leafy clearing.

And these sacred spaces, which are very closed cosmos, they are a world in and of their own. They emanate their magical narrative of the rest of the text and the mood, the cosmos, they generate and describe also inform the spirit of the text. So magical realism reorients not only our habits, and our understandings of time and space, but also our sense of identity.

So with over five hundred children of midnight talking through one person's head, is Saleem sane any more? Similarly in *Distant Relations*, the reader asks, who is the voice in that voice? And what are the relations? Who are the relations we are talking about? (refer time: 10:26)

So according to Linda Hutcheon, to quote her, "In *The White Hotel*, the realist novel's concept of the subject, both in history and in fiction, is openly contested" (unquote). That contestation is all the more, you know, cogent and convincing because it comes from within. The magic contests, but it contests from within the realist premises, realistically rendered historical fiction.

And from the vantage point of the realistically conceived narrator, as we read magical realist texts, the magic seems to grow almost imperceptibly out of the real dimensions, giving us what Salman Rushdie would call a dense commingling of the improvable and the mundane.

So graphic illustration of this phenomenon, an extension of the strong mimetic quotient of magic and its relation with historical dimension is observable in the way events are

usually grounded in a traditionally realistic, even in an explicitly factual manner. So magical realism is not something that cannot be documented, that cannot be grasped, and it is not talking about something otherworldly.

It is dealing with this world through the uninitiated eye, through the eye of the other. Just harken back what I said the context of Barthes' work 'Mythologies'- for someone who does not know the wedding culture in, in southern Africa or in India, the relation of the form and the meaning, the signifier and the signified seems ridiculous, it could seem preposterous, right?

So this vision is something that the reader has to engender for all kinds of cultural activities, that there is nothing intrinsic, nothing natural about them. They function smoothly because the entire society has generationally agreed to see certain things in terms of certain meanings, certain significance. (refer time: 13:09)

So Felipe Montero in *Aura* reads the magically potent job that you will eventually take in the newspaper. *The White Hotel* begins with fictional letters from Ferenczi and Freud; Rushdie situates his narrative in the events surrounding India's independence and the turmoil that follow.

So just when Remedios the Beauty's levitation begins concretely and for real Fernanda, while hanging out the laundry feels (to quote from the book), a "delicate wind of light pull the sheets out of her hand and open them up wide" (unquote).

Remnants of this quality, this marriage between the mundane and the magic, of magic's gentle blossoming out of real ordinary happenings persist even when the fantastical elements show their colors quickly, transitorily in a fleeting manner and yet clearly enough.

So in *Perfume*, for example, Jean Baptiste Grenouille with his magically powerful and discriminating sense of smell is born in a geographical space in (to quote from the book) "in Paris under the sway of a particularly fiendish stench" (unquote), and later in the text, there is mention of a catalog of stenches (to quote) "barely conceivable to us modern men and women" (unquote).

So Grenouille is a product of this smelly environment. The smells, the different stenches that cannot be grasped by the modern and postmodern sensibility. So a smell a sensory quality or experience that is associated with history, with time, a smell that has no register, no recognition in the current times. Grenouille is a product of such an environment, perhaps as a way of compensating for his mother's utterly dulled sense of smell. (refer time: 15:35)

The next feature that we are going to talk about is that metafictional dimensions are common in contemporary magical realism. So metafiction is a very common feature. The fact that the texts provide commentaries on themselves, often complete with occasional *mise en abyme*, or story within a story, which refers to miniature emblematic textual self-portraits, right?

So magical power of fiction itself, the capacities of mind that make it possible, as well as the elements out of which it is made, could be signs, images, metaphors, could be narrators, all of these foreground the metafictional effects. So the reader is constantly aware of how the fiction is being produced.

In *Midnight's Children*, metaphors for the making of fictions from the partial view obtained by a Muslim doctor of his patient through a hole in a bed sheet to chutnification of history. So this is a peculiar term that Rushdie uses, chutnification of history in jars and they recur throughout the narrative with amazing frequency, right? (refer time: 17:05)

So to quote from *Midnight's Children*, "To pickle is to give immortality, after all: fish, vegetables, fruit hang embalmed in spice-and-vinegar; a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely? The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind; and above all (in my thirty jars and a jar) [equalling the thirty one chapters of the novel] to give it shape and form—that is to say, meaning. (I have mentioned my fear of absurdity.)"

So this is something that Rushdie has to say about his work, *Midnight's Children*. Beloved seems to have an almost metafictional dimension about her. Beloved seems to elicit stories at various points in the narrative. To quote from Morrison's work. "'Tell me,'" said beloved, smiling a wide happy smile. "Tell me your diamonds," it became a way to feed her. Sethe learned the profound satisfaction that beloved got from storytelling. As she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to liking it" (unquote). (refer time: 18:38)

When the name of Fuentes' character Artemio Cruz appears in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or even poet Paul Eluard is mentioned in Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the reader experiences the magical power of ghostly presences in the literary heritage, right? So this is also the quality of intertextuality, where one text is constantly borrowing from and informing other texts.

The texts happen in a continuum. The texts happen in a continuum, in a continuum of a given tradition; in this case, the tradition of postmodernism and magical realism. So

the reader may experience a particular kind of verbal magic, where the gap between the word and the world closes. This is another chief characteristic of magical realist writing. In other words, a demonstration of the linguistic nature of a magical experience is frequently there in a magical realist work. Magic happens, so magic happens when a metaphor is made real. One often says that blood is thicker than water. That is a common saying. And this is further extrapolated and extended in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where Jose Arcadio Buendia shoots himself.

a trickle of his blood "came out under the door, . . . went out into the street, . . . went down steps and climbed over curbs, . . . turned a corner to the right and another to the left," and once inside the Buendia house, hugged the walls "so as not to stain things," and came out in his mother Ursula's kitchen." (refer time: 20:41)

So when this sort of literalization happens, either the reader's imagination or the text itself supplies words. Shortly before Remedios' levitation the reader gets to know that Remedios the Beauty was not a creature of this world. Similarly, in *Midnight's Children*, one hears that Saleem is "handcuffed to history" and then witnesses the invasion of his head by the voices of his compatriots.

This linguistic magic which runs through magical realism, thrives on like I said the intertextual practice that is prevalent in many postmodern writings, as well as through the presence of an intertextual bricolage. So intertextual magic in which characters from other fictions appear is relatively common. And seen from this angle one could say that *Don Quixote* is one of the first magical realist novels.

This experimentation celebrates the the solidity of inventiveness, which takes the reader beyond representation, you know, to the realm of re-presentations. We are not talking about mimesis in the traditional realist sense, but we are talking about new objectivity, re-presentation of the old, the selfsame world. The reader is surprised by the literality of the play of language in linguistically motivated fictional moments, right?

So the blood that travels becomes a magical object. It has its own destiny, its own small story, its own small point of view to follow in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. (refer time: 22:53)

So the next point I am going to talk about is the magical realist narrative, you know, appearing to the late 20th century adult reader as fresh, childlike, and even to an extent, primitive. Wonders are recounted in a matter-of-fact way as accepted, you know, presumably as a child would accept them without undue questioning or reflection. So

magical realist works achieve a kind of defamiliarization that appears to be artless and guileless, not something that is premeditated.

As if in homage to the fresh vision of discovering ice we find in *Midnight's Children* towards the beginning of the novel, Saleem's grandfather, Aadam Aziz, begins the day in Kashmir in the following way, (to quote from the text), "the world was new again. After a winter's gestation in its eggshell of ice, the valley had beaked its way out into the open" (unquote).

So MAGICAL REALISM (24:07) presents a different kind of freshness that emerges and happens, that takes off from the position of totalitarian terror. So we have unsheathed totalitarian terror on the one hand, and a freshness emerging from and because of that. Especially in chapters where we find Tamina reaching the dystopian island of children or even Lisa entering into the shocking extermination at Babi Yar. (refer time: 24:39)

So moving on to the next feature, repetition as a narrative principle is common in magical realist works in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues that are used symbolically or structurally. And these analogs create a magic of shifting references. So for example, Saleem's life in *Midnight's Children* mirrors that of the new post-colonial Indian nation with which he himself was born.

We have an analogy here. A mirror that stands between Saleem's conditions and which is reflective of India's conditions at that time. Jorge Luis Borges' *Aleph* reflects all the world and the self. In Cortazar's story *Axolotl*, the aquarium wall through which the narrator watches the Axolotl and through which he finally passes is a kind of magical special mirror.

So similarly, the place of Cortazar's narrator in *The Night Face Up*, between modern and Aztec worlds, is a temporal double-sided mirror. So in *Distant Relations*, the doubling of characters and stories that constitutes a mirror principle of narrative structure is reinforced through reflecting surfaces within the novel, especially through the symbol of the windows.

A similar kind of narrative mirroring shapes *The White Hotel*, where the same story is retold through reflected personalities. Like reflections in actual mirrors, the reflected narratives are and yet are not the same as the original one. The term original in this context is very contentious, very problematic. What is original? postmodern talks about the death of the reference, right? The death of the real. (refer time: 26:52)

Next is metamorphoses, which is a common event in magical realism. So metamorphoses is also common event in magical realism. Metamorphoses embody coalition of two different worlds in the realm of organisms. We are immediately reminded of Gregor Samsa, transforming from human to an insect. In *Axolotl*, the narrator becomes *Axolotl* or vice versa. There is transmigration of soul. In India, you know, beliefs regarding reincarnation make metamorphoses through time particularly ubiquitous.

And many of the characters in *Midnight's Children* duplicate one of the deities. So Saleem's much mentioned nose corresponds to Ganesh the elephant-headed God's trunk. And then Saleem's chutnification of history refers to his art of transforming and preserving the chaotic passage of time and events, which is metaphorical in nature and spirit. (refer time: 28:06)

A carnivalesque spirit is common in magical realist novels, where language is used extravagantly and expend its resources beyond its referential needs. So language kind of blows up, it creates a carnivalesque kind of spirit. That is another feature of the magical realist artwork, especially the magical realist novel.

So Jean-Francois Lyotard maybe imagined to have the oppositional terms of magical realism in mind when he calls for resistance to retrogressive desires, as a way of (to quote Lyotard): "the realization of the fantasy to seize reality" (unquote). One could say that in magical realist texts, the answer is to wage a war on any kind of totality, or any kind of a grand narrative, metanarrative, to explain in a Lyotardian way.

So "wage a war in totality," to "be witnesses to the unrepresentable and the irreducible; in sum, to affirm the magic of the storyteller's art, to invite Scheherazade's children over to play, whatever their ignorance of the rules of our games, and however fantastically they may be dressed." So here we are talking about the germ of magical realism and postmodernism being very much present in *1001 Nights*.

So in terms of clothing, in terms of the forms these characters such as Scheherazade might look anachronistic and even peculiar to the modern eyes, or even Don Quixote might look too out of context in the modern and postmodern sense. So it is with them that the tendencies of modernism and postmodernism began through relying on the implausible, the magical and trying to foreground the magical through reality and vice versa. (refer time: 30:40)

So *Midnight's Children* is carnivalesque in its conscious adoption of the style of a Bombay talkie. So it is a cast of thousands, songs, which is you know marked by dances,

exaggerated sumptuous scenarios. Also horrifying blood and gore. And this is a baroque mode of overextension, almost hyperbole. Scheherazade's narratives, which are 1001 in number refer to a numeral of excess.

So person that keeps telling stories, till three years have elapsed, and they count as 1001. So it is emblematic of the notion that there is always one more and it is also symptomatic of the modern novel, a characteristic of modern novel where we are closing because we have to give it so there is some kind of authorial control being imposed as a way of closing it.

Otherwise, there is the internal logic, there is the internal and natural termination to these stories leading to another story and so forth, right? So Jean-Francois Lyotard characterizes the postmodern as (to quote Lyotard), "that which searches for new presentations ... in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (unquote). So magical realism exemplifies this notion in its paradoxical name itself.

Part of its attraction for postmodern writers may be its willfully oxymoronic nature. It is exposing, it's you know debunking and cracking open the unrepresentable, its activation of and playing with the differences. I would like to stop my lecture here and let us meet once again with another round of discussions and another lecture. Thank you.