

Magical Realism in the Arabic Novel?

I. Definition of Magical Realism

A literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre, magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a so-called rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites; for instance, it challenges binary oppositions like life and death and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present. According to Angel Flores, magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, or as he claims, “an amalgamation of realism and fantasy.” The presence of the supernatural in magical realism is often connected to the primeval or magical “native” mentality, which exists in opposition to European rationality. According to Ray Verzasconi, as well as other critics, magical realism is “an expression of the New World reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European super-civilization, and the irrational elements of a primitive America.” Gonzalez Echevarria believes that magical realism offers a worldview that is not based on natural or physical laws nor objective reality. However, the fictional world is not separated from reality either.

II. Characteristics of Magical Realism

Hybridity: Magical realists incorporate many techniques that have been linked to post-colonialism, with hybridity being a primary feature. Specifically, magical realism is illustrated in the inharmonious arenas of such opposites as urban and rural and Western and indigenous. The plots of magical realist works involve issues of borders, mixing, and change. Authors establish these plots to reveal a crucial purpose of magical realism: a more deep and true reality than conventional realist techniques would illustrate.

Irony Regarding Author’s Perspective: The writer must have ironic distance from the magical worldview for the realism not to be compromised. Simultaneously, the writer must strongly respect the magic, or else the magic dissolves into simple folk belief or complete fantasy, split from the real instead of synchronized with it. The term “magic” relates to the fact that the point of view that the text depicts explicitly is not adopted according to the implied worldview of the author. As Echevarria notes, the act of distancing oneself from the beliefs held by a certain social group makes it impossible to be thought of as a representative of that society.

Authorial Reticence: Authorial reticence refers to the lack of clear opinions about the accuracy of events and the credibility of the worldviews expressed by the characters in the text. This technique promotes acceptance in magical realism. In magical realism, the simple act of explaining the supernatural would eradicate its position of equality regarding a person’s conventional view of reality. Because it would then be less valid, the supernatural world would be discarded as false testimony.

The Supernatural and Natural: In magical realism, the supernatural is not displayed as questionable. While the reader realizes that the rational and irrational are opposite and conflicting polarities, they are not disconcerted because the supernatural is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictional world.

Adapted from: <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/21/magical-realism/>, accessed 12/7/2015.

III. Questions:

1) What is the relationship of “magical realism” to colonial and post-colonial literature? How might you understand “magical realism” as a reaction to the modernist literary project?

2) Is *The Tent* an example of “magical realism” in the Arabic novel?