

## **(Re)Reading Magical Realism in P. Padmarajan's "Kunju"**

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### **Abstract**

Arguably, Padmarajan's "Kunju" is rendered with a forte for blending the everyday with the miraculous, the historical with the fabulous, and psychological realism with surreal flights of fancy. He has proved himself as one among the practitioners of magical realism. The characteristic features of this kind of fiction are "the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or strange, skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic descriptions, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable". The short story is revolutionary in the sense that it provides a looking glass into the thoughts and beliefs of its author, who chose to give a literary voice to the hitherto unspoken theme.

Keywords: Realism, Magical Realism, Surrealism

Magic realism is a literary form in which odd, eerie, and dreamlike tales are related as if the events were commonplace. Magic realism is the opposite of the "once-upon-a-time" style of story-telling in which the author emphasizes the fantastic quality of imaginary events. In the world of magic realism, the narrator speaks of the surreal so naturally it becomes real. Magic realism in its literary and artistic applications aimed to re-imagine the world and its reality. It is not an escapist venture but rather an opportunity to see the fantastic in the everyday. There are multiple stylistic traits of magic realism. The key, however to magical realism is defamiliarisation<sup>11</sup>(Landers 22). Throughout the short story defamiliarisation remains consistent. These traits distinguish magic realism from the fantasy genre. In fantasy novels, the created world must have an internal logic. Magic realism however, is not subject to natural or physical laws. The short story is an exemplary piece of magical realism, in which the supernatural is presented as mundane, and the mundane as supernatural or extraordinary. The story presents a fictional story in a fictional setting. As a sage and as an iconoclast the repertoire of Padmarajan is at its peak in the short story.

The term "Magical realism" was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magical realism as an art category. To him, it was a way of representing and responding to reality and pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality. In Latin America in the 1940s, magical realism was a way to express the realistic American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature. This was brought to a different dimension as the concept diversified its horizon to other parts of the world. OV Vijayan is considered as the pioneer in experimenting magical realism in Malayalam literature. However Padmarajan's use of magical realism is of a distinctive essence. "Kunju" came out in a period when the European world of literature was in an air of experimentation. Thus the peculiarity of the text can be read in terms of its influence from other literatures as well.

An "irreducible" magic which cannot be explained by typical notions of natural law is a major feature of magical realism(Bloom 67). This is followed in the narrative for the incidents that the mother and the father witness cannot be explained by the natural laws of human logic. It also involves realist description that stresses normal, common, every-day phenomena, which is then revised or "refelt" by the marvelous. Extreme or amplified states of mind or setting are often used to accomplish this. This distinguishes the narrative from myth or fantasy. It causes the reader to be drawn between the two views of reality. These two visions or realms nearly merge or intersect. In the short story time is both the history and the timeless, space is constantly challenged and identity is broken down at times.

The text employs a "verbal magic" where metaphors are treated as reality. This again gives legitimacy to the infant who speaks to its parents. The language used for the same is also idiosyncratic. Repetition, as well as mirror reversals, are often seen as the traits of magical realism. In the story the mother and the father repeats the fact that the child is not dead and that it is not dying. Metamorphoses<sup>12</sup> takes place in the narrative. Magic is used against the established order providing legitimacy to the impossible. The child is set against a silent isolated land and the child's uniqueness contradicts with the incapability and helplessness of the parents. "Ancient systems of belief and local lore

often underlie the magical realist narrative”(Hegerfeldt 43).This results in a respect however complicated for local faith. This mythical hindrance is evinced when the father fears to take the child in the arms and when the father fears the gleaming sunlight.

The story hints about the three mystic philosophers who visited the Christ. But they are not identical for they seem to be too humanly in the work with fears, anxieties and advice for the parents. In fact, the Bible cannot be excluded when talking about magical realism. While some may take offense to calling the Bible a book of myths, the supernatural and miraculous events contained in the Bible undeniably share qualities with early folklore and legends.

In the text collective symbols and myths as well as individual ones haunt the work. Magical realism has a tendency to defamiliarize the scene for readers which is deftly employed in this work also readers learn that they have not come entirely ready to understand the situation, that what we thought we knew is found to be strange, for it has something entirely unexpected to teach us. This is done through introducing an isolated place as well as a painful and strange past.

Magical realism’s readers learn "border skipping" because they must move between fabulism<sup>13</sup> and European realism (Landers 82).Magical realism in some forms can be understood as a post-colonial move that seeks to resist European notions of naturalism or realism. At times, it calls for a deep hybridity<sup>14</sup> of cultures and reading experiences. “The idea of terror overwhelms the possibility of rejuvenation in magical realism” (Gentzler 45).The text contains a consistent state of urgency throughout the narrative. From the birth of the child till the final departure of the father with the murdered child on the shoulder, this state of terror and uneasiness prevail. A brief glance of modern critical theory may suffice to show that a large number of critical terms in literature are borrowed from painting. Magical Realism is also one of these terms. In painting, it is marked by “a use of skill, sharply defined, smoothly painted images of figures and objects depicted in a somewhat surrealist manner. The themes and subjects are often imaginary, somewhat outlandish and fantastic with a certain dream like quality. Thus this emancipatory or free willed quality of painting is also reflected in these magical realist narratives. Later, the term was caught on in literary circles and was frequently used by critics. By 1980s, it had become a well-established label for some forms of fiction. The story having been published in 1977 had been revolutionary in using this conceptual frame work. The major exponents of this kind of fiction are Argentinean Luis Borges, Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Cuban Alejo Carpenter. Others who experimented with this technique and got success are Gunter Grass, Emma Tenant, Angela Carter, John Fowles and Salman Rushdie.When Padmarajan is placed against these celebrated writers, he stands firm with his distinctive way of storytelling and the inhabitation of this magical realist elements.

Magical realism differs from genres such as fantasy and science fiction for it is rooted in the “limited circumstances” rather than being set in an environment that is spectacular or impossible. There is often a lack of awe or shock as characters encounter miraculous or magical events. It is not that Magical realism discounts or dismisses an overtly spiritual or esoteric approach to events. However, because its transcendent moments take place in such ordinary places with ordinary people, they make the transcendent and ecstatic moments accessible to all. In this way, the sacred life is not just dangling above our heads like an impossible summit. In the short story the place where the characters live and the words that they utter following the miracle are amalgamated in such a way that this ordinary realm with the ecstatic situations occur simultaneously.

The Magical realism employed here rather than avoiding social upset through escapism, approaches reality with a mythical manner that empowers us by doing something which other forms of fiction cannot. It places the power of magic right on the reader’s lap, not in some place far, far away in some unknown galaxy. Magic becomes even more significant when it emanates from primitive cultures’ folktales and oral traditions. Rather than giving into the hopelessness of an unsettling political or social climate, magical realism suggests the possibility of transforming it by offering a perspective that is larger than life. In other words since the impossible, whether beautiful or terrifying, takes place in a realistic realm, the elements of the fantastic create not a separate world or escape, but celebrate instead the magic of ordinary life by putting miracles within reach. Very often, Magical realism has been linked to indigenous that is, world views deeply steeped in the myths and legends of cultures with a ritualistic religious foundation. Through the indigenous belief systems, the writer re-creates the cultural practices that totally differ from Western paradigm.The idea can further be elaborated with the help of the text where the infant capable of vocal communication transports its essential identity from one form to other. The interwoven realm between natural and supernatural has made magic realism stand on its own. Many people think that magical realist stories are not much different 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 magical realism, ghost is accepted into real life and unquestionable. This unquestionable acceptance happens in the story as well.

The techniques of Magical Realism give the author a platform to express opinions, political views and criticism on real life and explicitly. Magical realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that the magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed ( Faris 165). There is always a space to comment on the clash of different cultures and the inequality of political, economic or social power. Magical Realist writer apply different rules to the world of fiction, but still represent them in a realistic way. This makes the reader believe 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 it automatically. The magical always has its legitimate place and is never questioned by the characters. 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. In the narrative, the road between life and death is very thin and hence the tone of urgency prevails.

“Kunju” 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 it often deals with the notion of space, particularly when it comes to the space of the fiction. Hence the work remains prevalent in a postmodern situation as well. “Magical realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that the magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed”. (Faris 169). This organic growth becomes the crux of the narrative contributing to its nonpareil existence.

#### **Works Consulted**

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