

2018 Vol:5 / Issue:23	pp.1209-1213	Article Arrival Date (Makale Geliş Tarihi) The Published Rel. Date (Makale Yayın Kabul Tarihi) The Published Date (Yayınlanma Tarihi)	02.07.2018 14.08.2018 15.08.2018
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MAGICAL AND FANTASTICAL ELEMENTS IN “THE INCREDIBLE AND SAD TALE OF INNOCENT ERENDIRA AND HER HEARTLESS GRANDMOTHER” BY MARQUEZ

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ABSTRACT

The term “magical realism” has been a much debated subject in literary theory. Since Franz Roh first coined the term in 1925 in connection with Post-Expressionist Art, it has been most closely associated with two major periods in Latin American and Caribbean Culture, The first being that of the 1940s and 1950s, in which the concept was closely connected with that of the “marvellous” as something ontologically necessary to the regional population’s “vision of everyday reality”; and the second being that of the increasing period of the Latin American novel in the late 1950s and 1960s. As a prominent writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez produced successful novels and short stories which are rich in magic realism. “The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother”, one of his well-known stories, contains both magical/supernatural elements and rational/realistic components in terms of characters and plot. Marquez’s story The Innocent Erendira illustrates Todorov’s idea of the fantastic narration which demonstrates a hesitation of the character or the reader between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. In this article, I will be examining the magical realist elements and Todorov’s idea of fantastic and their application on the story.

Key Words: Magical realism, fantastic, Todorov, Marquez

ÖZET

“Büyülü gerçekçilik” edebiyat kuramı bağlamında çok tartışılan bir terim olagelmiştir. Franz Roh bu terimi Post-Ekspresyonist Sanat ile bağlantılı olarak ilk defa 1925 yılında türettiğinden beri Latin Amerika ve Karayipler Kültüründe ilki 1940lar, diğeri 1950ler olmak üzere iki ana dönemle yakından ilişkilendirilmiştir. Bunlardan ilkinde kavram bölge nüfusunun “günelik gerçekliğin imgelemleri” ile ontolojik anlamda gerekli olan “olağanüstü” ile yakından ilintili; ikincisinde ise 1950lerin sonu ve 1960larda yükselen Latin Amerika romanı ile ilintilidir. Önde gelen bir yazar olarak Gabriel Garcia Marquez büyülü gerçekçilik açısından zengin olan başarılı roman ve hikâyeler yazmıştır. Bilinen hikâyelerinden biri olan “İyi Kalpli Erendira ile İnsafsız Büyükannesinin İnanılmaz ve Acıklı Öyküsü” karakter ve olay örgüsü bakımından hem büyülü/olağanüstü unsurlar hem de akılcı/gerçekçi bileşenler içermektedir. Marquez’in hikâyesi olan “İyi Kalpli Erendira” Todorov’un fantastik anlatım fikri olan karakter veya okuyucunun tarif edilen olayların doğal veya olağanüstü olup olmadığı arasında kararsızlık yaşamasını gösterir. Bu makalede, büyülü-gerçekçi unsurları ve Todorov’un fantastik fikrini ve bunun hikâye üzerinde uygulamasını inceleyeceğim.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Büyülü gerçekçilik, fantastik, Todorov, Marquez

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Magical Realism

The term “magical realism” has been a much debated subject in literary theory. Since Franz Roh first coined the term in 1925 in connection with Post-Expressionist Art, it has been most closely associated with two major periods in Latin American and Caribbean Culture, the first being that of the 1940s and 1950s, in which the concept was closely connected with that of the “marvellous” as something ontologically necessary to the regional population’s “vision of everyday reality”; and the second being that of the increasing period of the Latin American novel in the late 1950s and 1960s (Slemon 9).

Despite the theoretical vacuum in which it lies, the term retains enough of what Fredric Jameson calls a “strange seductiveness” (Takolander 13). Being an oxymoron, the term suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and fantasy. In the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other (Slemon 11). In other words, to give a more precise definition of it:

Magic realism is an aesthetic style or narrative mode in literature in which magical elements are blended into a realistic atmosphere. These magic elements are explained like normal occurrences that are presented in a straight forward manner which allows the “real” and the “fantastic” to be accepted in the same stream of thought (Rainer 13).

Scott mentions some of the common characteristics of magic realism as follows: fantastical elements (fable, folk tale, myth, etc.), hybridity, metafiction, sense of mystery, irony, political critique, the supernatural and natural (141).

Marquez’s story *The Innocent Erendira* illustrates Todorov’s idea of the fantastic narration which demonstrates a hesitation of the character or the reader between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. In this paper, my focus will be on the magical realist elements and Todorov’s idea of fantastic and their application on the story.

1.2. Todorov’s Idea of Fantastic

For Todorov, the fantastic is defined as a moment of hesitation between the belief and disbelief of the supernatural. It is a very fragile literary form, as it can all too easily swing from one side to the other. Only that suspension between the two makes the literature fantastic:

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event (Todorov 25).

Essentially, to Todorov, the uncanny is the supernatural explained, and the marvelous is the supernatural accepted as real. Only in the hesitation between deciding which of those two applies can the fantastic be found. To put it differently, “I nearly reached the point of believing: that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic: it is the hesitation which sustains its life” (Todorov 31).

1.3. Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Garcia Marquez was born in 1928 in Aracataca (Colombia), a small coastal town remote and obscure. Marquez, describing his home town, says: "There was a constant need for diversion. Jugglers, magicians and fire-eaters arrived and many things happened. The memory I have is of a hot dusty and violent town. The weekends were a regular fiesta when we virtually locked ourselves in the houses. On Mondays there were corpses and wounded people lying in the street." From a town where myth, fantasy and superstition dominated the life of young Marquez, he went to the university in Bogota. Later he became a journalist and travelled widely for 20 years as correspondent. Garcia Marquez produced six novels and numerous short stories apart from his journalistic writings. Marquez’s inclination for being a story-teller might have been conditioned by his childhood. The first eight years of his life he spent with his grand-parents, whom he described as people of "imagination and superstition". His grandmother narrated stories of ghosts and spirits and of dialogues with dead relatives (Maurya 53-58).

1.4. The Innocent Erendira

The story opens with 14-year-old Erendira bathing her obese grandmother. After she is done with attending to the old woman, Erendira has to take care of countless chores around the house. Finally, when she is finished with all the work, she lights a candle to find her way back to her bedroom where she faints from exhaustion. As she forgets to blow out the candle, the house catches on fire and the mansion belonging to her grandmother burns to ashes. The grandmother tells Erendira that she has to repay the debt and that she is going to start repaying it immediately. Afterwards she takes the child to the house of old shopkeeper, who is known for paying well for sex with virgins.

When the shopkeeper is finished with Erendira, her grandmother prostitutes her to the rest of the men in town and then they travel to the next village where the same scenario occurs. They keep traveling in this manner for several years. One day, Erendira makes love to a young boy called Ulises, who falls in love with her. He is determined to come back for her and eventually he does. They formulate a plan for Erendira to escape when her grandmother is asleep. This, however, does not work out as Erendira's grandmother contacts the civil authorities, who manage to track the young couple down and to return Erendira back to her grandmother.

Afterwards, Erendira continues traveling with her grandmother from town to town, making money from prostitution to pay back her debt, until they reach the sea. Ulises appears again and together they make another plan to win Erendira's freedom. Erendira asks Ulises to kill her grandmother and he agrees. Firstly, he attempts to kill her by arsenic, but when that does not work out, he tries to explode her tent while she is inside, but that does kill her either.

Eventually, Ulises has to stab her to death. While the boy is recovering from his first cold-hearted murder, Erendira grabs her grandmother's gold vest and runs away never to be seen or heard of again.

1.5. Magical Realist Elements in *The Innocent Erendira*

Some of the major magical elements in the story is as follows: Erendira's grandmother's monumental size (262)¹ which may stand for abuses of matriarchy; numerous clocks of unthinkable sizes and shapes in their house (263); Erendira's setting the clocks in six hours (264); Erendira's falling asleep while she is walking (265) may stand for domestic drudgery that Erendira has to undertake; the mayor's mission to make it rain with an army rifle (282) can be interpreted as male power and dominancy; the grandmother's waiting for Erendira without sleeping or eating anything for days and nights and their limited conversation (283) may represent the unaffectionate nature of their relationship.

The dialogue between Ulises and her mother also displays magical elements:

When Ulises returned to the house with the pruning tools, his mother asked him for her four o'clock medicine, which was on a nearby table. As soon as he touched them, the glass and the bottle changed colour. Then, out of pure play, he touched a glass pitcher that was on the table beside some tumblers and the pitcher also turned blue. His mother observed him while she was taking her medicine and when she was sure that it was not a delirium of her pain, she asked him in the Guajiro language: "How long has that been happening to you?" "Ever since we came back from the desert," Ulises said, also in Guajiro. "It only happens with glass things." In order to demonstrate, one after the other he touched the glasses that were on the table and they all turned different colours. "Those things happen only because of love," his mother said (288).

Some other magical elements are as follows: the diamond in oranges (291) which may indicate the rampant smuggling in the country; Ulises' hearing Erendira's inner voice and finding her (303) which can be interpreted as even prostitutes can fall in love; the grandmother's eating the whole cake without chewing or swallowing it (306); the grandmother's being alive despite the arsenic she ate (306); the grandmother's having green oily, shiny, and green blood (310) which can all be interpreted as the ruthless and powerful matriarchal figure who exploits her granddaughter.

Some of the realistic elements in the story are as follows: Erendira's being forced to become a prostitute represents the problem of child prostitution in Colombia. The Colombian laws governing prostitution in the 1940s prohibited prostitution in Bogota and regulated it in zones where it was tolerated. Prostitutes were by law, required to register and such registered prostitutes were not free to leave prostitution or travel as they pleased. The law was abolished in 1962 (Barry, 27) so the child prostitution in the story has a factual reflection in real life; real and everyday characters such as smugglers, missionaries, or soldiers and their corrupt officialdom which enables the grandmother's commercial sexual exploitation of Erendira to flourish. For example, the civil authority mayor, who ironically is a military man, advises how to find her granddaughter and provides a police and military escort immediately to pursue Erendira and Ulises. Erendira's enslavement becomes a state business to such a degree that the police and military

¹ From now on, all the quotations will be from the book *Innocent Erendira and Other Stories* by Marquez.

convoy pursuing the fugitives, upon meeting some smugglers their response is “At least...you could have the decency not to go around in broad daylight” so this scene can be interpreted as how the laws in Colombia are for the most part very weak and there is corruption in the application of the law; another realistic element is Erendira’s sufferings which turn into a traumatic experience at the hands of her grandmother and it symbolizes the oppressive child prostitution. Marquez draws attention to the underage sex and trafficking of children for commercial sexual exploitation; last but not least is the protest of missionaries towards prostitution and their effort to help Erendira:

“The desert doesn’t belong to anyone,” the grandmother said. “It belongs to God,” the missionary said, “and you are violating his sacred laws with your filthy business.” “I don’t understand your mysteries, son.” The missionary pointed at Erendira. “That child is underage.” “But she’s my granddaughter.” “So much the worse,” the missionary replied (281).

1.6. Todorov’s “Fantastic” in the Story and How It Fits the Definition

As mentioned earlier, “fantastic” is defined by Todorov as a moment of hesitation between the belief and disbelief of the supernatural. In other words, in the works which can be categorized as fantastic, the reader has a sense of confusion about whether a work presents what Todorov calls “the uncanny” and also supernatural phenomena turn out to have a rational explanation or the supernatural is accepted as real. Therefore, the ending always comprises the hesitation. In the story of *The Innocent Erendira*, readers encounter elements of fantastic. The text itself is rich in examples of supernatural such as diamond in oranges, a giant grandmother and her unusual habits, green blood, goats committing suicide, falling asleep while walking or sleeping with eyes wide open, touching and changing of certain objects. At the same time, there are various rational events and explanations such as everyday characters, love affair, child prostitution, sufferings of Erendira, and other incidents that take place in the story. Therefore, the reader experiences a hesitation between the supernatural events and the rational explanations and incidents that occur throughout the story. The reader is able to say “I almost reach the point of believing” at the end of the story.

2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as a prominent writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez produced successful novels and short stories which are rich in magic realism. “The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother”, one of his well-known stories, contains both magical/supernatural elements and rational/realistic components in terms of characters and plot. We see magical elements ranging from diamonds in oranges to the grandmother’s green blood and monumental size. It is also possible to point out that at the end of the story Erendira is able to escape both from her grandmother and Ulises but the story is left open-ended since the reader is not given any indication about what will happen to her in the end. Marquez may imply that in circumstances where there are no social safety nets or institutions to protect vulnerable people, the only real rescuer and liberator is the magic. As realistic features we see child prostitution as a reality that haunts the world and its fictional representation is part of the acknowledgement. There are also two institutions, the religious and legal system, fail to help Erendira. It can also be said that there are no evident legitimate social security spheres to support people in need. Therefore, Marquez’s story *The Innocent Erendira* fits the definition of Todorov’s fantastic as it embodies not only supernatural but also rational elements and it leaves the reader at a hesitation or suspension point because the story swings back and forth between the supernatural and the rational.

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