

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 3.9

Vol. 4 Issue 3 June 2018

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132



MAGICAL REALISM IN JUNOT DIAZ' *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

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Abstract

In 1925, Franz Roh, an art historian developed magical realism in painting. Later the Latin American writers aptly used this genre in their literary works in 1930s and 1940s. Junot Diaz, as a Dominican American writer has used magic realism in his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The novel deals with two super natural themes *fuku* (curse) and *zafa* (redemption). A supernatural character mangoose appear as a force of redemption when the characters undergo tortures. The characters suffer from nightmares. A man with no face appears whenever they are in distress. Diaz treats these supernatural characters as real to denote the problems of the native Dominicans and the Dominican Americans. The novel conveys the universal fact that when there is suffering or problem, there will be surely a relief and solution to it.

Keywords

Magical Realism, Supernatural, Realistic, Exaggeration, Fuku, Zafa, Mongoose, No Face Man.

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Magical realism takes its origin from arts especially painting. In 1925, Franz Roh, an art historian from Europe wrote an essay which described the usage of magical realism in painting. Roh defines magical realism as, "the mystery [that] does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (qtd. in *Magic(al) Realism* 2). Later the Latin American writers aptly used this genre in their literary works in 1930s and 1940s. Magical Realism emerged as a fictional genre in which magical elements blend with the real world characters. Magical realism has a connection with Surrealism which is a movement started in the early twentieth century. Surrealism aims at creating dream like images which represents the subconscious mind. Magical Realism is defined as, "The free expression by objective means of the subjective feelings of an individual or group, through art, music, poetry, dancing, painting etc. where real forms are combined in a way that does not conform to daily reality" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* 290).

The Spanish painter Salvador Dali's 'Burning Giraffe' defines surrealism aptly. Magical realism combines real or ordinary elements with the magical elements. These elements are not gothic. Ghosts or angels may exist in a magical realist story. But they do not surprise or shock the readers. They mix with the life of the characters. Magical realism is very much used by the boom writers of the twentieth century. Junot Diaz, as a Dominican American writer has come from this lineage. He has used this. His novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a mixer of different genres like magic realism, science-fiction and historical reconstruction. The elements of magical realism blends with the story in an excellent manner. As quoted in *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*:

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...its method was first conceived, more importantly, as a response to the nature of South American reality. In counties previously ruled despotically as colonies and subsequently negotiating independence with no long-established institutions or free- / doms, the fact that information can easily be manipulated or even commandeered by power groups makes truth a far more provisional, relative entity. (*The Cambridge Guide* 624 - 625)

Magical realism accepts supernatural as rational. Realistic setting is mixed with a strange or unbelievable event. Exaggeration and bizarre events are the elements of magical realism. They become a part of the real world. Recognizable character, true to life setting, mixed with historical events. The characters conflict with the natural real world surroundings. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, when Beli is fighting with her death in the cane fields, the mongoose talks with her and gives her strength for survival:

You have to rise.

My baby, Beli wept. Mi hijo precioso.

Hypatia, your baby is dead.

No, no, no, no.

It pulled her unbroken arm. *You have to rise now or you'll never have the son or the daughter.*

What son? She wailed. What daughter?

The one's who wait.

It was dark and her legs trembled beneath her like smoke.

You have to follow. (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 149)

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz deals with two super natural themes *fuku* (curse) and *zafa* (redemption). In the introductory chapter, Diaz introduces the idea of *fuku* as a general curse to the New World. Every family in the Dominican Republic receives this *fuku*. Later, he narrates how it has affected Oscar and his family in particular:

They say it first came from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 1)

La Inca's prayer carries some holiness and she is an embodiment of good magic. Her version of good magic is prayer. "Let me tell you, True Believers: in the annals of Dominican piety there has never been prayer like this. The rosaries cabling through La Inca's fingers like line flying through a doomed fisherman's hands. And before you could say Holy! Holy! Holy! She was joined

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by a flock of women, young and old" (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 150). Her prayers save Beli from death.

In the novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a supernatural character mongoose appear as a force of redemption when the characters undergo tortures. "...a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt" (149). It is a totemic protector denoting African root. This mongoose also sings songs , especially the well known lyric "Sueno, sueno, comolu to llamas... Yo me llamo sueno de la madrugada" (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 150). Mongoose represent a mixed-race root. "The Mongoose, one of the greatest unstable particles of the universe and also one of its greatest travelers. Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean" (ibid 150). Like *fuku*, mongoose passes from Africa to the Antilles have extra terrestrial aspects as well. It serves as a salvational force.

The basic characteristic feature of a magical realistic fiction is that it is based on reality. It is not a fantasy, horror or science-fiction. The novel revolves around three generations; Abelard, Beli and Oscar. History of the Dominican Republic goes in hand with the movement of the story. Abelard and Beli live in the regime of the famous dictator Rafael Trujillo. When Beli is tortured by Trujillo's men, mongoose appears and gives her hope. Diaz says, " Since its earliest appearance in the written record-675 B.C.E., in a nameless scribe's letter to Ashurbanipal's father, Esarhaddon-the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. Believed to be an ally of Man" (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 151). A man with no face and mongoose appear in front of Beli and Oscar. When Beli is beaten in the cane fields she happens to see the man with no face. It symbolically represents the quest for identity. She is beaten by the Trujillo's men as she is an orphan and a black girl who is unfit to love his soldier. It is seen as the *fuku* on the Dominicans.

Fantastic situations are treated normal in the novel which is one of the characteristic features of magic realism. "A situation that in the fantastic would amaze the implied author and unnerve the protagonist, in magic realism is accepted as a normal everyday occurrence. Unlike in fiction of the marvelous, e.g., fairy tales, the portrayal of the supernatural in a work of magic realism, for eg, the characters react normally" (*Varieties of Magic Realism* 25). The characters do not justify why these unreal elements occur and accept them as part of their real world. Magical events are narrated by the author as if they are ordinary. Beli reacts to those incidents in a normal way. Ordinary events sometimes change into extraordinary. The events that happen reveal the mystery and magic behind that ordinary event.

Mongoose appears throughout *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as guardians of De leon's family. Historically, the mongoose was imported from Asia during the 18th century.

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Mongoose were imported to tropical islands such as the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Hawaii. They protect sugar cane fields from rat infestations. Like the people of the Dominican Republic, the mongoose are also immigrants. In a footnote, the mongoose is described as “an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies... an ally of Man” (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 25). Junot Diaz equates mongoose with the *zafa*, the force of redemption. For example, when Beli is beaten in the canefield, the mongoose appears. Diaz describes it as, “...creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt” (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 26). It motivates Beli and sings to her to guide her out of the cane field. The creature acts as her protector, saving her after the atrocities just committed against her. Oscar remembers a ‘Golden Mongoose’ which appears just before he throws himself from the bridge and again when he is beaten in the cane field for the first time. In the cane field, the mongoose talks to Oscar and saves him.

Surrealism brings out the dreams of subconscious mind. Magical realism is parallel to surrealism which brings out the hidden thoughts in an exaggerated manner. Apocalyptic thoughts are inseparable with the third world immigrants. It is reflected in the works of Junot Diaz also. Isolation is seen in all characters. By the end, each appears to lose something valuable in their lives. Oscar loses his love and is killed. Beli loses her son. Lola fails in her love three times and leads a mechanical married life. The narrator Yuniors also leads one such life. The characters live a life full of strange emptiness and solitude. The impact of loss is always there with them. They have dreams about their future and ambitions. But they meet failure in course of time. Except Yuniors, all the characters Lola, Oscar, Beli and Abelard are suffering from psychic paralysis. Loneliness is one of the burning problems of the expatriate community in the nation of their choice. Oscar in the novel gets interested in apocalyptic stories and movies like *Akira* due to his seclusion from the society.

Most of the characters suffer from a nightmare in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Beli’s mother Socorro often wakes up from sleep shouting about fire. “...Socorro dreamed that the faceless man was standing over her husband’s bed, and she could not scream, could not say anything, and then the next night she dreamed that he was standing over her children too” (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 237). Beli and her daughter Lola and son Oscar get the nightmare of a man with no face. Yuniors also suffers from the nightmare after the death of Oscar. “About five years after he died I started having another kind of dream. About him or someone who looks like him.... Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming” (325). Diaz ends the novel with a note of hope. Yuniors thinks that Lola’s daughter Isis also will face the family curse. “And for the first time she will hear the word *fuku*. And she will have a dream of the No Face Man” (ibid 330). Yuniors finds the *zafa*. “I’ll take her down to my basement and open

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the four refrigerators where I store her brother's books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers-refrigerators the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything" (330). He also hopes that their next generation will be free from the nightmares. "And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her insights and she'll put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream. (ibid 330-31).

Oscar is obsessed with apocalyptic movies and comic books. He also tries to write one such. In some ways, the supernatural helps to lighten the political undertones of the story. The use of the magical elements also allows Díaz to construct a story that uses the power of imagination to construct a reality that realism cannot adequately describe. Magical realism is primarily a Latino form of writing, and Díaz has used it unconventionally to tell the story.

Later, when he would describe it, he would call it the Golden Mongoose, but even he knew that wasn't what it was. It was very placid, very beautiful. Gold-limned eyes that reached through you, not so much in judgment or reproach but for something far scarier. They stared at each other—it serene as a Buddhist, he in total disbelief—and then the whistle blew again and his eyes snapped open (or closed) and it was gone. Dude had been waiting his whole life for something just like this to happen to him, had always wanted to live in a world of magic and mystery, but instead of taking note of the vision and changing his ways the fuck just shook his swollen head. (*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 190)

Oscar even writes a book that explains the *fukú* and its place in his family. Ironically, the book is lost before it reaches Yunior, just as the book by Oscar's grandfather about the supernatural roots of Trujillo's regime might have vanished years before. "So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a *fukú*? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here" (ibid 243).

Junot Diaz has handled the traditional Caribbean literary tradition of magic realism in an effective manner. He has used the postmodern fragmented narration which suits the magic realism in a unique way. He starts with the supernatural characteristics of magic realism. *Fuku* and *zafa* takes ordinary form through the man with no face and mongoose respectively. The supernatural elements present in the fiction are not questionable. It is not a fairy tale or myth but a reality. Magical element remains as a driving force for the plot. It also travels with time along the other characters. The magical element ultimately justifies its presence by giving a social or political message. The story moves with great interest due to the introduction of magical element. It does not look weird. Instead the readers take it as fact and grasp the message of the author. The novel conveys the universal fact that when there is suffering or problem, there will be surely a

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relief and solution to it. Thus, Junot Diaz, as a Latin American writer has touched his roots by handling magical realism as one of the genres in his post modern writing which is a pastiche of different genres.

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