

# When a Work Walks Ahead of Times: O. V. Vijayan's *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* as the Product of Postmodern Sensibility

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## **Abstract**

This article aims to analyse and interpret O.V. Vijayan's *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* through a postmodern lens. This analysis opens up myriad ways of understanding the transformation of a postmodern concept from an unfamiliar concept to acceptance about its Indigenous identity. The study is motivated by the dearth of research emphasising and testing postmodern design in the use of magic realism in fictional writing, parting with the actual mode of fictional writing. By comparing and defining the theme of the journey, this article tracks the demand and transformation of a colonised concept from an unfamiliar beginning to acceptance of its Indigenous identity. We will also examine deep and rich myths and the Khasak stories that give a supernatural aura and delves into the cultural representation of post-independent Malayalam literature.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Magic Realism, Myth, Culture.

## **Introduction**

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## Magical Reality and Truth

Postmodernism refers to theories, streams of philosophy, mind, literature, finance and generation that emerged from modern technology, order, semiotics and languages. Postmodernism broadly aims to undermine Western metaphysics and other fundamental aspects of Western culture, including language, identity, foundation, name, and mind, often framed as consequences of colonialism and ongoing imperialism. Postmodernism emerged in conjunction with the philosophy of anarchy, nihilism, disassembly, emptiness and confusion, and remains closely tied to these concepts.

Postmodernism manifested in complex political conditions after the end of World War II, particularly within the context of the bloodless battle, the upward thrust of nuclear guns, the beginning of human rights and the emergence of theatre. Philosophies like surrealism, existentialism, absurdism and nihilism led the movement from Modernism to Postmodernism. The principles of postmodernism are pervasive in many fields, including literature. Indeed, one genre that rose to prominence due to the influence of postmodern thought was magical realism. As a genre, magical realism is concerned with how aspects of magic would exist within the real world: taking the mystical elements of fantasy and recontextualising them within the everyday. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris explain,

Magical realism is a mode suited to exploring...and transgressing... boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds.<sup>1</sup>

Using magical concepts affords a manner for writers to express a practical view of their cultures and societies, which had been formerly rejected by using the ruling colonial system. As Josephine Dandy suggests about the authenticity of magic:

[It] shares many of the same concerns and techniques as post-modernism, but it is located within, and in particular exists as a result

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<sup>1</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (eds), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 5-6.

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of, a specific social context, and is particularly concerned with the representation of the multi-dimensionality of that social context through art.<sup>2</sup>

The authenticity of magic is a vast area, especially when its shape is informed by distinct culture. For instance, Latin American, Caribbean, and Indian texts often contain aspects of magical realism that specifically relate to aspects of the author's cultural background.

The main impetus for this research includes an analysis of different forms of subconscious studies, inclusive of hallucinations, and reminiscence. These elements come under the category of, firstly, seeing illicit things is often discussed as a dream extension; and secondly, reminiscence and memories the past, often buried within lack of knowledge. As Dandy summarises, "Magical realism [can be] defined as a mode of narration in which natural and supernatural are presented in a state of equivalence with one another."<sup>3</sup>

Magical authenticity is more than a divisive practice among Latin American writers like Jorge Luis Borges. Rather, it is a living and realistic way of expressing the text, effective against the ruling rhetoric to truly reflect postcolonialism. It reveals the strange truth of postcolonial culture, which seeks to free itself from the principles of the authorization of the ruling discourse, which reflects the truth as its unity. Here, magical truth effectively dispels the dominant language, which cannot conform to any other style or genre, and also contradicts many postcolonialism practices from the end of post-colonial society to the future of mixed culture.

In short, the authenticity of magic is a significant but often neglected element of magical realism. As the world grows more connected, and as the submit-colonial technology disappears, writers of many cultures ought to find new approaches to specific their truths and find which means in a blended lifestyle. In an era where the shortage of truth is frequently celebrated, authenticity is based on the want for self-focus, particularly cultural identity. The magical data integrates myths and legends into a unique format, forming a new version of the novel as it is examined.

Magical realist texts frequently go beyond spiritism, turning into a vital part of subculture. Magical authenticity is not only a new way of searching books, but a new manner of shaping cultural authenticity itself. In

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<sup>2</sup> Jo Dandy, *Magic and Realism in Ben Okri's The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment and Astonishing the Gods* (Master of Arts Thesis, University of London, 1996), pp. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Graham Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Cultural Politics of the Postcolonial Novel* (PhD Thesis, Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 102.

the colonial paradigm, when supernatural phenomena arise, the fact of magic does not really reflect reality, instead existing within a fantasy world that does not reflect our own reality. In this way, magical realism is a response to the colonial inability to imagine a world where magical aspects of culture are taken seriously. However, as the sector becomes more accessible, and more books are published from authors with diverse backgrounds, the genre retains an unimaginable violence to be reconsidered and redefined in a manner that reflects the truth of folks who live in violence.

Magical realism has a number of key elements, including importance of magic and myth, evaluation of rational wondering and progress, scepticism of information, self-expression, and specific aesthetics. Many texts of magical fact have more potential than myths and legends to create a true model that distinguishes what is typically known as real life. Every other governing frame of proper textual content is questioning the truth, the usage of a new language that increases doubts about the concept of truth and the capacity of texts to breed it. For writers like Marquez and Allende, truth includes each actual and imagined action. For Borges, truth becomes research and an everyday lifestyle that removes the ideas that the general public percentage approximately imaginary information. To many such writers, life is not inherently magical, and thus introducing magic into depictions of reality assists in recontextualising both concepts. In these cases, magic is used as a tool to centre narratives that feature characters who exist outside of the colonial norm, often being Indigenous and possessing their own, non-colonial ideas of magic and reality.

The simultaneous presence of magical myth, and elements of hybrid, postcolonial or postmodernism novelistic resources, in this type of prose often leads the author to an idea of “true magic”. Magic has always been an important part of various storytelling practices, from oral epics to drama and plays. Although myths may be considered superstitious, they are still taken into consideration to be proper and true to the recipients of that way of life even as texts containing texts containing magic are categorised beneath the myth. Magic is placed beside ordinary matters and made to grapple with issues such as life and death, dreams, civilisation, sex and gender, and metaphysics. The boundaries of fact are extended to meet the overall view of truth. The paranormal realities are set inside the actual world unlike some other sort of myths set in the world of fiction or magic introduced with the aid the author’s creativity.

As a style of fiction, magic realism is an exceptionally extensive field,

with intricate structures both overlapping and dismantling, engaging and insulating, coarse and indefinite. In particular, magical realism is popular with Latin American, Caribbean and Indian authors, who have made use of it for a variety of ends, be it resistance, subversion or manifesting multiculturalism. There are many features and elements that are often combined to create this literary technique, such as intertextuality, metatextuality, distortion and jumbling up of time and space, introduction of the realm of the subconscious and bifurcation of the plot. Magic realism has been primarily understood as a battle between the opposites—the real and the magical — between the binaries, resulting in “a syncretism between paradoxical dimensions of life and death, historical reality and magic.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, it “provides a fictional ground in which to imagine alternative narrative visions of agency and history.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, magic realism becomes characteristically discursive and diverse while encapsulating reality in substitutive ways and from varied perspectives, the known and the enigmatic, the visible and the intrinsic, the apparent and the inherent, the rational and the irrational.

The impetus of this article is, thus, to explore how magic realism is used as a useful narrative device for expressing views that oppose the dominant commonplace practices of thinking, while grasping the paradox of the coalition of the opposites. As Maggie Ann Bowers puts it, “In marvellous and magical realism ‘magic’ refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science.”<sup>6</sup> Magic Realism as a narrative mode is interesting not because it is an oxymoron or because its contradictions are confusing or because magic is fun but because the world created by the author of magical facts is fascinating. Our preconceived notions of truth have been relegated to the real magical world of these texts. We firmly accept that Magic Truth is a form of truth, but it is different from the common Western truth.

Significantly, the authenticity represented in the Magic Truth is closely related to certain cultures. Indeed, the scepticism with which non-Western examples of magical realism are approached underscores the fact that there is a fundamental need to look at the aspects of Real Life in Magic

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<sup>4</sup> Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 19.

in these cultural presentations. This awareness is the basis of this research project and enables one to take Magical Realism out of its limited space, as being a mode that conjoins the real and the magical, questioning “the received ideas about time, space and identity.”<sup>7</sup>

### ***Khasakkinte Ithihasam***

Magical Realism from Latin America becomes a self-definition rather than an expression of Manichean anxiety. This is the foremost reason for its presence in different periods of history from the boom to the present. Maria Eugenia Rave in her thesis, ‘Magical Realism and Latin America’, notes that:

The use of Magical Realism as a means of artistic literary expression continues to prevail for now, because while there exist problematic situations or changes in normal life in the countries of Latin America, there will always be inspiration for the creators and a motive to express their feelings. It’s us that will disappear for periods of time and will reappear at other times, as if it were manipulated by the magic of life. At the time that Magical Realism is observed, other styles will also be seen. But this is the one that many prefer, and which will prevail.<sup>8</sup>

O.V. Vijayan is an exquisite Malayalam creator recognized for his religious ideas and highbrow talents, having worked as a political commentator, cartoonist, journalist, and a hit author for Sahitya Academy. It took him twelve years to complete writing *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (English: *The Legends of Khasak*), eventually publishing in 1969. The story takes place in Khasak, based on Thasarack, a rural village in Palakkad where Vijayan once lived. The novel is the non-linear tale of graduate student Ravi who subsequently became a teacher in a village where myths, superstitions, and divisions are an essential part of human existence.

By using magical authenticity and its ideas to express cultural symbols, the author creates a dream-like aesthetic in some parts of the novel. With this, he can speak feelings or thoughts as a way to continue to be silent, or as a minimum do no longer deliver the same which means given to the dream in an effort to interpret the signal. Reminiscence in the text additionally serves as a method or tool, allowing the characters to return to the past. This allows the reader to provide data, but is also appropriate as the

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<sup>7</sup> Wendy B. Faris, ‘Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction’, in *Magical Realism*, eds Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Eugenia B. Rave, *Magical Realism and Latin America* (Master of Arts Thesis, University of Maine, 2003).

person is able to see things in another way. Linden Peach notes that, Many postmodern and postcolonial writers, even allowing for the complex and contradictory ways in which these labels have been defined, use a variety of techniques to ‘speak of the past’, many of which are employed...for example, parallel stories, diverse modes of communication, intertwining the historical with the private and/or the mythical and the ‘realistic’ with the fantastic.<sup>9</sup>

The novel has no active narrative motivation, largely describing Ravi’s encounters with spiritual significance and philosophy. Through this encounter, Vijayan narrates many myths, legends, and superstitions in Khasak. As a former student from Madras, Ravi is perfectly placed to juxtapose considerations of these traditional concepts with the science and logic of Western education. The complexity of communication between these two worlds plays a major role in this novel. Through myths and legends, Vijayan re-examines the similarities of the past tense narrated by the people of Khasak, giving him a completely different view of the cultural connection between time and place.

Indeed, the atmosphere of Khasak has a distinct mythical quality to it. Residents do not worry about the problems and chaos of life; they do not repent of their deeds. Ravi, however, is a newcomer and therefore still subject to reality as it exists outside of the village; he is uniquely forced to take responsibility for his actions. As he spends more time in the village, he begins to become part of it, encountering supernatural phenomena and coming to see it as normal just as the other residents do. In this way, Khasak is distinct from the rest of reality, existing in a mythic bubble.

Ravi’s arrival in Khasak is not a way to escape his life; rather, it is a pursuit of eternal life. He begins his journey in the evening, a sign of the subconscious mind. He is driven by a sense of guilt and the anxieties of the past. This is an example of the existence of great emptiness that pervades the novel. Ravi has no direction, simply following the universe and the material life that accompanies it. Over the course of the novel, Ravi becomes a zealous seeker of absolute truth and eventually comes to know many real things in his life. When he is forced to finally flee Khasak in the final pages, it is left ambiguous whether he will be able to adapt back to the non-magical world outside of the village.

Ravi’s unique position between the town and the outside world provides an avenue of consideration for the relationship between magic and

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<sup>9</sup> Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 22.

physics. A highly intelligent pupil, Ravi spent several years studying astrophysics at university. The magic he encounters in Khasak throws into doubt the fundamental truths he had accepted for so long in his studies. Additionally, the of the town hate development and higher education as they consider it as undermining their lifestyle and traditions. Their subsequent illiteracy further distances them from the rest of reality, giving the entire setting a sense of being outside of time. This theme is continued through the Khasak views on various topics, such as their belief that illnesses had been brought on while the gods became as indignant as smallpox and believed that they had been caused by Poti [Bagavathi]. Alla Pitcha, Moulavi of Khazak, views Ravi as an enemy of nature due to his attachment to modern education. Through his positioning of the village as outside of contemporary society, and indeed even the contemporary time period, Vijayan creates a mythic space in which to examine the presence of magic in the “real” world. As an outside, Ravi first encounters this as strange, but is soon immersed in the setting and finds himself questioning the authenticity of the world outside of Khasak. Throughout this, Vijayan forces Ravi, and the reader, to consider our understanding of what “reality” actually is.

### **Magic and Colonisation**

The concept “magical realism”, and indeed its very name, have not been without criticism since their emergence. The term has been described as not specific and “critically rigorous” enough to have earned a place among most established genres. However, Christopher Graham Warnes argues,

There exists a large body of fiction - whether from Latin America, derivative of the Latin American style or having nothing to do with Latin America - that combine realism and fantasy, yet does this in such a way that the resultant mode or genre cannot be described as fantasy, science fiction, the uncanny, the fairy-tale, the baroque or with any other of the categories with which magical realism overlaps.... In the magical realist text, as Salman Rushdie puts it, talking of Garcia Marquez, ‘impossible things happen constantly and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun.’ Despite its many failings, magical realism is the only term in wide critical circulation that is capable of providing a name for this category of literature.<sup>10</sup>

As such, the phrase “magic realism” does in fact enable one to differentiate and study a type of narrative that does not fit into different genres. This leads us to examine the authenticity of magic as a cultural passage.

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<sup>10</sup> Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Cultural Politics of the Postcolonial Novel*, pp. 3-4.



Writers use the method of goals, reminiscences and thoughts, to carry their narratives to their viewers with the usage of "deft phrases and witty invention".<sup>11</sup> In doing so, they find and share the truths. The approach used to attain this turned into a shared platform of records and magic and myths, and although every of those writers had an extraordinary reason for their novels, the entire purpose changed into the same.

In reality, actual magical literature is about political research of this kind, which follows the so-called 'increase technology' of magical authenticity within the 1960s, and the enthusiastic encouragement of publishers and vendors of novels the usage of this form. The works are full of topics and common topics such as magic and delusion, possession, intelligence and development, politics, and contextual thinking. These multinational writers, social scientists, and politicians have made their personal distinctions in producing first rate books with magical symbols in "relationship to the post-colonial and first world contexts."<sup>12</sup>

Discussions of Magical Realism begin by situating the mode against the background of other modes/genres. It has been compared with and contrasted with Realism, Surrealism, Fantasy, Science Fiction and other traditional Western genres. This kind of approach has privileged Western ideas of genre, a positioning through which the intrinsic quality of Magical Realism is lost. The association of magical realism with non-Western concepts and worldviews has led to the genre being considered as a significant aspect of the decolonisation of literature.

### Conclusion

This article examines O. V. Vijayan's *Khasakkinte Itihasam* and the importance of magical realism in decolonising global literature. Past discussions on Magical Realism centered on the lack of a classic definition, on it being pigeon-holed as postcolonial discourse, on it being a reaction against the master narratives, and finally placing it against the authoritative discourse of realism. This article advocates for the movement of discourse away from semantic concerns and towards a discussion that takes seriously the themes and tools associated with the genre, especially in how they are

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<sup>11</sup> Mark I. Millington, 'García Márquez's novels of love', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel García Márquez*, ed. Jérémie Barthas (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> Marisa Bortolussi, 'Introduction: Why We Need Another Study of Magic Realism', *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2003), p. 288.

used to represent non-Western worldviews. Magical realist texts present knowledge necessary for man's existence; knowledge that makes sense in the magical world. The Western world, in its 'whitening' project, has de-centred the native indigenous cultures and established itself as the centre based on apparently 'universal' truths. Magical realism calls into question these truths and considers their legitimacy, especially compared to non-Western worldviews that centre magic and the supernatural. Thus, Western science often is juxtaposed with other types of science, which have long been sidelined in Eurocentric academia. Without rejecting the accepted Western paradigms of science and history wholesale, magic realist fiction does suggest that, in their focus on facts, logical thought and empirical proof, these methods are by themselves insufficient to capture the human experience and therefore need to be supplemented by other modes of knowledge production.<sup>13</sup>

O.V. Vijayan undoubtedly had created a magical world and the readers can have a broad view of consciousness and things about human existence in this universe and the mysterious ways that make his life possible in this world. Like any other novelist, he has some idea of the truth found in the physical world. For this purpose, he made use of irrational language. There are some things in life that can be considered absurd in terms of their nature and meaning. The absurd realities connected to life remain the root of existence.

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Hegerfeldt, 'Contentious Contributions: Magic Realism Goes British', *Janus Head*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2002), p. 76.