

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 22
Intellectual Statism: The Problem of Reality and Magical Realism

Hello, good evening to all of you. Today we have an interesting phenomenon and a theme, it is called magical realism. So, as usual I divide this topic into two parts. The first one I sort of run through the notion of magical realism and in the second lecture, we will be doing a close reading of the short story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. So that is the structure of the engagement today.

I call the first lecture ‘Intellectual Statism; the problem of reality and Magical Realism - a review’. Well, at the outset Franz Roh coined the term ‘magical realism’ in the year 1925. What does that mean? Well, instead of directly getting into a definition, let us consider the following phenomenon. People die, and when they die from the children's point of view they may become stars; some may say to children that they have gone to heaven.

Even for adults the world can feel enchanted sometimes. For example, a particular place may feel filled up by an ancestral presence. Churches, temples and mosques - when you go there, you feel the divine presence. The supernatural cannot be totally ruled out even by the most atheistic minded. Think about a war ridden place, say Indian borders, Kashmir, Palestine and many parts of the world where people live provisionally. That means they would not know whether they will wake up tomorrow; they sleep and sleep can become permanent. Well even if they wake, they could hear guns everywhere. And children growing up in the neighborhood may distinguish between this brand of gun and that brand of gun by the sounds that they make. Nightmares such as Bhopal gas event in the 1980s, which a lot of people have survived. And surviving people, even people who are given to post memory trauma (those who did not experience violence directly and yet relive the trauma) may feel that they have vivid fantasies or glimpses of the dead. They may feel that they are haunted. So, sometimes they are not able to make very rigid distinctions between the dead and living.

But it does not mean these things are psychological alone, they are lived realities. So, it seems reality as a theme and as a framework cannot be felt by senses alone; that which can be verified by senses such as touch, hearing, seeing alone may not be real. To claim so therefore is hegemonic and one-upmanship. That said, reality looks polyvocal, polygenetic and multiple.

So it can encompass the super real, the ordinary, the divine, the diabolic, fictional, the world of fantasy, imagination, all rolled together. Looks like that is magical realism. So, let us get into formal definition. What is magical realism? Now Christopher Warnes and Kim Anderson Sasser define the phenomenon in the following way: “in the narrow sense in which the term is used by literary critics, magical realism refers to a mode or a style, sometimes a genre of writing in which magical elements are presented alongside realistic ones as if there were no difference of kind between them. A magical realist text will treat supernatural occurrences as if they were perfectly natural. It will incorporate without surprise fantastic elements into the realm of history and objective materiality”.

Why did I begin this talk with terms like intellectual statism, the problem of reality and magical realism? Well, ‘intellectual statism’ is not my coinage, it is by Franz Roh who coined the term ‘magical realism’ to express his appreciation for art which was not metallic. He could appreciate art if it is three-dimensional, if it can show people in flesh and blood, spirit, enthusiasm, psychological universe, narrative universe and this and other worldly realities in some way residing in the person.

For example, if scientific empirical thinking alone should define me, well I may not be more than 500 rupees worth; a bag of calcium, some iron, some magnesium, and so on. That is what I am then. But is that what I am? No. Every individual is priceless because they comprise different narrative universes. And those universes cannot be measured by senses alone. Magical realism in some way captures that in a holistic way.

So, intellectual statism would mean to believe in the power of intellect in gathering everything by reason and reason alone or reason supported and upholstered by senses - this you can define as intellectual statism.

Well, but why am I talking about intellectual statism and magical realism in a course on disability studies or disability and literature? Well, the idea of disability studies is not to just talk about disability alone. In fact, capturing lived realities of disabled and nondisabled alike and also capturing human conditions linked to disability such as caring and so on cannot happen without critically examining notions, frameworks and epistemological viewpoints (the way you look at things by way of knowledge) that inform disability and so on. So, the notion that intellect upholstered by senses or sensory data can alone capture reality is intellectual statism.

So, what I propose here in line with Franz Roh and score of critics who followed him is that we would like to believe now that magical realism does two things: 1. It challenges intellectual statism, and 2. It is able to offer narrative viewpoints that lie beyond the scope and bandwidth of the intellect.

Where is magical realism? As I began, it is everywhere. Sometimes when you believe in cognition and intellect alone at large, it does not unfold in front of you. If you do not (if you are not given to intellectual statism), it can appear in all its resplendent glory in front of you. Then why privilege Latin America as the center for magical realism? (This talk itself is actually on the Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez)

Why should one privileg Latin America? Well, certain historical material conditions in Latin America such as wars, the role of imperialism and devastations and political turmoils led to a reality which was not becoming easy to capture from a traditional reality point of view. And what is 'traditional reality', you may ask. Let us first ask what reality is.

One way to handle reality is that you write about someone say, Hem (the speaker). What happens is that one may begin a psychological sketch of that person called Hem. You begin with his childhood, growing up in Chennai, going to a special school and so on. So, one traces

psychological development of the person. Nineteenth century Dickens' works such as *Oliver Twist* and many others work are based on this systematic and yet steady tracing of psychological mapping of the evolution of the person. And it is not just intellectual, it is overall psychological growth. So, that is one way of looking at reality.

The other way of looking at reality is reality that can be verified outside Dickensian novel. Talk about Industrial Revolution, social repercussions, class repercussions, gender repercussions, and make the novel integrated with those externally historically verifiable data and that which is not idiosyncratic, impressionistic, and so on. They can be verified by historiography, intellectual histories, newspaper reportage and all that. So, that which is verifiable is also reality, a second kind of reality.

A third kind of reality is a reality in which competing voices come together. For example, you want to know about how was short story in 19th century America or how was the practice of untouchability in early 20th century. So, then you go back to your grandma or great grandma's accounts, and then you collect oral testimonies. Then you read between the lines about stories, legends, fairy tales, and also historically verifiable records, newspaper reportage, magazines across the languages and so on. So, something along the third line of reality, magical realism can launch itself because it deals with the spirit of things. I am reading Braille now. One way to look at it is to see it as a literacy tool, a communication medium. But other way to look at it is its tactual hectic integration with my personhood, how integral it is to my evolution. So, when learning Braille, Braille can be an animated presence for a child. Objects do not remain static dead materials; they can animate. Many cultures believe in animism - Japanese, for example. So, a challenge the rigid notion of reality can also come from magical realism.

Therefore, it can be no longer considered as quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing reality. So, if I say that I feel the presence of my dead grandpa in my study room, from that one does not have to conclude that I am mad clinically or I do not have to be declared quixotic, but I might see or witness his presence by the books that he read and the legacy that he passed on to me and so on.

In other words, you can look at magical realism as a kind of fusion or fusion music, Carnatic and Rock. Here your magical realism combines classical reality fiction (like the ones I talked about Dickens) and the new 21st century or 20th century material reality; it combines both. So it combines the traditional, the spiritual, and the material. And by that fusion method it lives in the liminal territory between the traditional real and the new real! Maybe I am playing with words, but the point is to say that it is hard to exactly define what magical realism is because for one, it is human and two, it captures human realities that are both seeable, experienceable and intuitive. It is spiritual and the material rolled together. So therefore, its presence and its boundaries cannot be quickly defined. In other words, one can say that it is an object of polygenesis; 'genesis' refers to origin. Erik Camayd-Freixas defined it like that. Well, he defines the polygenesis idea in the following way: "Well, the origin of magical realism can be traced back to the genres of the marvelous folk stories, fairy tales, legends, ancient myths and so on".

Well, folklore is very rich. Folklore lays the foundation of our unconscious collectivity. Folklore claims - and rightfully so - a fuller wisdom of hard power, soft power, give and take social contract situations, it can flexibly by riddles, stories, magically enchanting rhythms give the core of our collectivity and personhood and what we ought to aim in life; it can say many things.

So because magical realism as a way of thinking combines both the folklore and material, it can give access to realities that cannot normally be seen with modern technologies. Freixas continues, "magical realism belongs to a family of modern meta-discourse about our collective past discourses that reflect on ancestral narratives, practices and myths or their remnants relating them to our collective present".

So what else is there to say about magical realism? Well, let me think a bit loudly about why we should take magical realism seriously as students of disability studies? One, we are interested in busting intellectual statism. Two, we also believe in enduring beauty and politics of care. Families care, families also carry a stratified deposit of memories linked to care, families have this or that notion linked to care.

For example, “in my family we care for the sick this way or in your family maybe different” and so on. Immortal fights can occur between families when they come to gather by way of wedding. It is a kind of testimony to how obsessive people and families can be about their specialized notions within them. Well, in a negative way too in many, many ways, and therefore unnecessary schisms and battles can happen.

Apart from memories of care, disability studies can also see the point of magical realism about care objects such as Braille, mobility cane, prosthetic devices, family and collective objects, school, school verandas, diaries, libraries which have metanarratives associated with them. For example, the mobility cane, I still have it with me, it was gifted by my grandma. Since she is no more, I stopped using it but I just have it as her presence in some way and thus I preserve it. So, apart from this, disability studies is also concerned about different narrative universes, it is concerned about the notion of representation. Disability studies is also invested very deeply in the notion of publics that we want to create.

What am I saying? There are multiple ways to look at public spaces. For example, this is a public space from where I am talking to you. One way to talk about public space is to draw a strict watertight distinction between the private and the public. So, therefore my grandma examples and all that should just be rolled into the bag and kept out. According to this view, no emotions or religious symbolisms can be used in public places. Only refined formal interactions can occur in public places. It is possible to conduct a life that way. Or else, one can be flexible; you can cry in public, you can worship in public, you can express affection and love in public, you can break down in public. A class can have students of different emotional wavelengths, intellectual wavelengths, different capacities and so on and therefore we do not need to have a strict sense of secular public and therefore it can enable participative futures for many.

So, in some sense magical realism is not a fashionable system where you bring all your stories together and roll them. It is a requirement of the publics that we wanted to create. It is true that people like Borges, Marquez and other fantastic Latin American writers must the same, but it is equally true that it is so popular a twentieth and twenty first century phenomenon going around the globe. Salman Rushdie and others have made a name from the Indian subcontinent in English

for magical realism. But for many of us, it can be a reality into which we slip in and slip out.
Thank you.