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MAGICAL REALISM IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2008. The book took Junot Díaz eleven years to write, and was his first novel. The story is set both in the United States and in the Dominican Republic. The narrative relates the characters' experience of being Dominican in both places. The novel incorporates elements of magical realism such as the Golden-eye mongoose which reappears at critical junctures in the novel. This paper argues that in the light of the growing scientific evidence that the universe is far more complex and magical than previously thought, the literary interpretation of magical realism elements should be reexamined and not merely dismissed as 'patently untrue' as Maria Takolander does in her analysis of the novel of Junot Díaz.

Keywords: *magical realism, true–untrue, scientific evidence, universe*

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2008. The book took Junot Díaz eleven years to write, and was his first novel. The story is set both in the United States and in the Dominican Republic. The narrative relates the characters' experience of being Dominican in both places. Straddling over three generations of the Cabral family, the novel incorporates magical realism elements such as the curse over the Cabral family called *fuku americanus* as well as the Golden-eye mongoose which manifests at critical junctures in the novel. Interestingly enough, the author Junot Díaz claims the mongoose saved the life of his mother in actual life.

The novel's protagonist, Oscar Wao is on a quest for love and identity, but before attaining the yearned-for ideal, he must negotiate the pitfalls of cultural and familial history which become intertwined into one seamless whole. Oscar's mother Belicia flees the Dominican Republic after her parents are killed by the dictator Trujillo, who is reputed to practice black magic, and after she is left for dead in a field by his thugs. In the United States, she struggles to build a new life for herself and her children. Ironically, Oscar's quest for love and sense of belonging takes him back to the Dominican Republic where he indeed finally finds love, but also meets his end, killed in a cane field for loving the wrong girl.

The story of the Cabral's and Oscar Wao is so outlandish that conventional literary tropes ring unconvincing and fall short of conveying the author's intentions. To overcome this, Junot Díaz deploys a set of magical realism features informing both form and content, rendering the novel, paradoxically, more authentic, criss-crossing repeatedly the boundary of truth and fiction.

A theoretical framework of the seemingly contradictory term magical realism is required at the outset of this analysis. There are several theoretical approaches in defining magical realist texts; however, I will focus on the one conceiving the genre as the function of traumatic experiences since it accords with the novel's plotline. According to this approach the intensity of the experience defies the capacity of traditional narrative modes to convey the nature, that is the reality of the trauma, and the resultant narrative void can only be filled by the so-called *magical reality* which mimics the *unreal* felt reality of the trauma.

In her essay *Theorizing Irony and Trauma in Magical Realism...*, Maria Takolander provides a list of several trauma studies interpretations of the literary confluence of magic and realism. For example, Eugene Arva explains the need of magical elements as: "the magic in magical realism confers on images an aura of irreality that may actually come the closest to the elusiveness of an actual shock chronotope" (Arva, quoted in Takolander 2016: 99). Respectively, a shock chronotope is defined as "time-spaces marked by events whose violence has rendered them resistant to rationalization and adequate representation" (Arva, quoted in Takolander 2016: 99–100). On the one hand, we might paraphrase this with the paradoxical statement that reality has become unreal, which, however, is a commonly observed phenomenon in the accounts of trauma survivors. On the other, the unreal-like experience related by survivors inhabits its own undeniable domain of ontological existence. It cannot simply be dismissed as unreal, because even if it does possess the characteristics of unreality, still it is perceived by the witnessing consciousness, which automatically lends authenticity and legitimacy to the felt experience. Once the legitimacy of an experience is established, a narrative technique must be devised with the corresponding capacity of conveying the felt ultimacy (if not reality) of the trauma.

Takolander provides another take on the rise of magical realism in the theoretical model proposed by Cathy Caruth who focuses on trauma's strength provoked by "the force of trauma's affront to understanding"(Caruth, quoted in Takolander 2016: 101). Caruth outlines two stages: numbing to reality and belatedness of recall, or as Takolander elaborates:

The original trauma inspires cognitive dissociation; the extreme experience is too overwhelming in time to be cogently or coherently perceived at the time. The recollection of it then returns in a way marked by that dissociation or incompleteness, as well as by its irrational force or intensity. (Takolander 2016: 101–102)

Conveying the felt reality, or shall we say unreality of trauma, calls for a new narrative mode, "a language that defies, even as it claims our understanding" (Caruth, quoted in Takolander 2016: 102). Thus Caruth "issues a profound challenge to the realist forms traditionally authorized as appropriate tools for depicting the remembered past and, indeed, opens a space for the privileging of experimental forms of representation when it comes to conveying trauma"(Takolander 2016: 102).

Another theoretician who perceives the traumatic origin of magical realism is Arva. He claims that the genre's advantage over mere realism is its capacity for conveying emotionally-charged layers of meaning because it:

“captures the *feel* of a limit experience, not the facts; capable of bringing the pain and horror home into the reader's affective world...while it might not explain the unspeakable...it can certainly make it felt and re-experienced in a vicarious way...the relationship between the real and the imaginary is not the same as between truth and untruth ...unreal but true” (Arva, quoted in Takolander 2016: 104).

Thus outlined, magical realism's affective tenet resembles strongly the idea put forward by Tzvetan Todorov. In his essay “Fictions and Truths”, Todorov claims that “What we do appreciate is verisimilitude, not truth: the effect of the real, not the real and true themselves” (Todorov 1995: 87). He also claims that “there are no facts, only discourses about facts; as a result there is no truth about the world, there are only interpretations about the world” (Todorov 1995: 88). Commenting on the difference between historians and ethnologists, on the one hand, and writers, on the other, Todorov observes that whereas the former must report only what has taken place, what can be established as facts, the latter, the novelist, “who is not subject to this ‘cult of the true word’, has access to a higher truth, beyond the truth of details” (Todorov 1995: 88). Some further elaboration is needed in terms of the theoretical foundation of such claims, which he duly provides:

We must distinguish between at least two senses of the word: truth-adequation and truth-disclosure; the former can be measured only against all or nothing; and the latter, against more or less. It is either true or false that X has committed a crime, whatever the attenuating circumstances; the same can be said over whether Jews were incinerated at Auschwitz. If, however, the question involves the causes of Nazism or the identity of the average French person in 1991, no answer of this nature can be conceived: the answers can only contain more or less truth, since they endeavor to reveal the nature of a phenomenon, not to establish facts. Novelists aim only for this latter type of truth (Todorov 1995: 90).

Todorov discusses the New World's discovery by Christopher Columbus and its subsequent naming after Amerigo Vespucci, a seemingly puzzling fact. Todorov notes that whereas Columbus described the New World in a truthful, stick-to-the-facts manner, Amerigo Vespucci owes his fame to only two letters comprising 40 pages in which his outlandish and scandalous accounts of the customs of the natives of the New World managed to capture the imagination of the Europeans. An apt illustration of Vespucci's strategy of exaggeration and reader manipulation is the following paragraph included in Todorov's essay:

The Indians take prisoners of war in order to eat them later; the male eats his wife and children with pleasure. A man confided in him that he has eaten more

than three hundred of his fellow human beings; and during a walk through Indian territory he (Amerigo) saw salted human flesh hanging from the beams...Indian women are extremely lustful...When they have the possibility of copulating with Christians, motivated by an excessive lustfulness, they debauch and prostitute themselves (quoted in Todorov 1995: 06).

Although these accounts were largely exaggerated, and many of them false, they celebrated the momentous discovery and met the expectations of the Europeans more aptly than the dry, matter-of-fact accounts of Columbus. As Todorov points out “Columbus was writing documents, whereas Amerigo was writing literature” (Todorov 1995: 104).

All of the above-mentioned brings up the subject of what is true and what is not. Let us take for example one of the magical elements in the novel of Junot Diaz *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Belicia, Oscar’s mother is being beaten in a cane field for having had an affair with The Gangster who happens to be the husband of Trujillo’s sister (Rafael Trujillo was the US-backed dictator of the Dominican republic from 1930 to 1961 when he was assassinated). After she is left for dead, a golden eye mongoose appears and leads her out of the field, practically saving her life:

So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species and placed its intelligent little paws on her chest and stared down at her.

You have to rise.

My baby, Beli wept. Mi hijo preciosos.

Hypatia, your baby is dead.

No, no, no, no.

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

What son? She wailed. What daughter?

The ones who await.

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

You have to follow. (Diaz 2008: 149)

Eventually, following the lilting song of the mongoose, who every now and then turns to look at her with its “chabine eys flashing through the stalks” (Diaz 2008: 150), Belicia makes her precarious way to a road where she is helped onto a truck and taken to hospital. How are we to interpret this? Is such an event possible, or should we dismiss it summarily as the make-belief of a mind reeling on the brink of death? We might easily dismiss this if not for another incident, years later, this time with her son Oscar, who claims to have glimpsed a golden eye mongoose at the moment of his attempted suicide. As he is readying himself to jump onto a busy road from seventy seven feet, Oscar witnesses a bewildering scene:

From what he would later recall, from what he would later recall, he stood on that bridge for a good long time...By then he was barely able

to stand. Closed his eyes and when he opened them there was something straight out of Ursula Le Guin standing by his side. 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. (Diaz 2008: 190)

The description of the golden mongoose Oscar glimpsed shortly before he jumps seems tantalizingly similar to the one that led his mother back to life years before that episode. If that was the subjective experience of one person only, we could very easily dismiss the whole matter as mere hallucination. However, the recurrence of the phenomenon witnessed by both mother and son at times of tribulation suggests that there must be a pattern denoting the author's intention this magically inexplicable element to be interpreted in a more objective light, bridging the gap between ontological realities; that is, the author really meant what he wrote to be taken as true fact, as ontological reality, as hard as it might be to prove that.

In her essay, Takolander sets out to prove that “magical realism's iconic narrative strategy of representing the fantastical as real is ironic. Magical realist texts narrate the patently untrue as though it is perfectly true— a textbook definition of irony” (Takolander 2016: 96). Having staked her ground, Takolander proceeds to build a convincing case of the ironic deployment of magical realism elements in two novels, one of which is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I have no argument with Takolander's *modus operandi* and have to admit that she builds a strong case. What I do challenge, however, is one small, minute premise that she starts from in order to build her entire theory. That premise is a simple statement, taken as axiomatically given by her, in the second sentence of the above quote where she *a priori* accepts that certain phenomena are ‘patently untrue’ and that they are being presented as ‘perfectly true’ in magical realist texts. One of these ‘patently untrue’ phenomena, which she respectively goes on to interpret in ironic context, is the golden eye mongoose. Takolander never bothers to elucidate how she decides what is true and what is untrue, and this is the only, and yet fundamental weakness of her ironic interpretation of magical realist texts.

Apparently, the problem here is of ontological nature. If something exists, it necessarily belongs to ontological reality, and hence it is undeniably true. Adversely, if a thing does not exist, it is untrue. We are not focusing on the treacherous mechanics of subjective perceptivity here, but strictly on objective reality. So, how can we be certain that there are no golden eye mongooses? From a logical point of view, the only way we can be certain of the negative answer to this question is if we assume that we possess complete, unquestionable and total knowledge of ontological reality. If we had such a wondrous entity as universal knowledge and if golden eye mongooses did not belong to the classifiable ontological reality, we would certainly be able to dismiss them as ‘patently untrue’, as Takolander does.

There is, however, a small pesky problem with such a proposition, or shall we say even presumption. The awareness of that problem is brought to us by none other than scientists, who are perhaps best acquainted with the nature of reality. As of now, scientists can account for only four percent of the mass of the universe. Calculations suggest that the universe is vastly more massive than what scientists can see, perceive etc. The remaining inexplicable 96 percent of the mass of the universe are, for all practical intents and purposes, invisible, or shall we say ‘patently untrue’, to use Takolander’s terminology. Scientists very conveniently call these dark matter and dark energy, because no one knows what the nature of most of the fabric of the universe is. If we think about it, the mere fact that we are living in a vastly unknowable ontological reality is in itself a magical realist fact defying not only common sense, but also giving the lie to common complacency and *a priori* presumptions. If we know next to nothing about ontological reality, how could we adjudicate what is not possible and respectively untrue? Let me paraphrase this in the following manner: how can we be certain that there are no golden-eye mongooses inhabiting the unknowable, mysterious, magical 96 percent of the universe, making their occasional manifestation in our minute 4 percent of the universe every now and then, when the occasion calls for it, in a novel or two?

The question might strike some as rather naïve, yet it is scientifically and logically rigorous and underscores the logical fallacy of Takolander’s unreflecting presumption in deciding that this or that is untrue. Unless we can prove that a phenomenon is impossible, we are bound to suspend our disbelief, which by the way is absolutely indispensable for the enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation of art in general, and fiction in particular.

Another cogent observation in that line of thought is the Big Bang theory. This theory is universally and unquestionably accepted by the scientific community as the only one explaining the existence of all of creation. According to it, all the trillions of galaxies, each one containing hundreds of billions of stars and planets, one of which we happen to be living on, appeared out of what physicists call a “singularity”. A singularity is a point in space which one could hold between the thumb and forefinger, smaller than the tip of a needle. Now, if we really give this astounding scientific fact a little of our precious time we will come to the startling realization that all of our cosmological and ontological knowledge is based upon the scientific fact that all of the universe popped out of nothing. Is this not a textbook definition of magic?!? Are we not living in a magical realist universe?!? Or should we dismiss the reigning scientific theory as ‘patently untrue’ to use the words of Takolander merely because we take our ignorance as the measure of the world and brand things true and untrue, possible and impossible in a completely arbitrary manner, firmly believing in the gospel of rationality and common sense, while being blissfully oblivious of the abysmal gaps in modern knowledge of reality upon which we build our perceptive framework of the world and the universe?

Another very curious facet of the “golden eye mongoose” debate is the fact that in one of his interviews Junot Diaz states matter-of-factly that a golden eye

mongoose saved the life of his mother. What follows is the answer of Junot Diaz as to the meaning of the mongoose in the novel in an interview published on the Internet *Labloga* site:

The mongoose is funny because he is my favorite character. He is the only real character. In the Diaz' family cosmology, he's the only real character in the book. There's a story my mom tells me about encountering a mongoose. She was lost once so that in some ways it inspired it. That character comes out of a childhood in the Dominican Republic being exposed to the mongoose. And you see them as a kid but you've never seen anything like it. They are extremely fast, extremely social, and clever.

And then of course you discover they are immigrants to the island. There was something that pulled me about the image of another transplant— who is a really wild little trickster. In “Oscar” there is the actual footnote on the mongoose, where the narrator says that these could also be aliens.

I couldn't explain it while I was writing it. But there was something about this family's history that provoked an assistant from this mongoose character. It is almost as if because their life is so shitty, they're able to gain this luminous intervention from what might be an alien. That is what I thought was funny because some people have said, oh, this magic realism bit. And I am like, oh my God, it's the exact opposite of it. (Labloga, 18th April 2018)

Three points stand out in the author's answer. The first being that the mongoose is the only real character since his mother experienced a similar event as the one described in the novel. Second, the suggestion that the mongoose might actually be an alien, which of course in the cosmology of disbelievers cannot be and is 'patently untrue'; and third, Diaz's explicit assertion that these episodes are exactly the opposite of magical realism elements, which means that we should not interpret them as unreal and untrue or ironically as Takolander does from the narrow perspective of her limited cosmology.

Why does that matter? It seems to me that some critics commit an unpardonable mistake by interpreting magical realist elements as lacking in authenticity, and thus as liable to be explained away and accounted for in the most arbitrary rationalist reductionist materialism manner. And these same critics remain deaf even to the avowed remonstrance from authors as is the case with Diaz who expressly rejects the untruthfulness of the golden eye mongoose episodes. What is at stake here is nothing less than the beauty of the novel. Consider how much richer and more magical a novel might be if we suspended our disbelief and limited understanding of what can and what cannot be, and simply enjoyed uncritically the marvelous world of a magical realist novel. What if the author really laid it all out for everyone to see and meant every bit of it instead of playing the trickster figure with his/her readers? Consider the rewarding and informative levels of such an unpretentious reading, unraveling before our eyes the true magnificence and wonder of the, as already mentioned, wondrous and mysterious world/reality/universe we inhabit. After all,

adopting the role of the judge ruling what is possible and what is not in a universe we know next to nothing about is, to put it mildly, an arrogant case of pretentious folly. Some of the latest theories in the realm of quantum physics such as the Super String theory predict the creation and existence of an infinite number of universes bubbling up from an intelligent energetic field informing the entire cosmos, resembling in its description what is commonly referred to as God. Another fantastic possibility predicted by the same theory is that with every choice we make another universe is being created where all the other alternative choices are being played out and so on *ad infinitum*. The implications from the latest and bewildering aspects of scientific theories are staggering and mind-boggling. Even scientists cannot come to grips with these conclusions at a rational level, and yet scientific experiments and facts suggest that the nature of reality and matter, for that matter, are vastly different from what we have come to take for granted. The mathematical equations of quantum physics are valid only within a 9 dimensional universe, and yet we are inhabiting and perceiving only a 3-dimensional ontological reality. What if there are Golden-eyes mongooses in one of the other dimensions we are apparently still unaware of? How infinitely more complex the universe must be than what we are currently cognizant of! Next to all these inconceivable possibilities suggested by the best scientific minds and theories, taking issue with a humble golden-eye mongoose and calling it ‘patently untrue’ is beside the point.

An important aspect of logic is the capacity for self-reflection and awareness of the assumptions that underlie our conceptual framework. Keeping in mind the latest scientific theories and incorporating and applying them to literary analysis is crucial since literature is a reflection of the cultural ethos of society. In the essay *Literature of the Replenishment*, John Barth touches upon the same idea by writing:

But I deplore the artistic and critical cast of mind that repudiates the whole modernist enterprise as an aberration and sets to work as if it hadn't happened; that rushes back into the hands of nineteenth century middle-class realism as if the first half of the twentieth century hadn't happened. It *did* happen: Freud and Einstein and two world wars and the Russian and sexual revolutions and automobiles and airplanes and telephones and radios and movies and urbanization, and now nuclear weaponry and television and microchip technology and the new feminism and the rest, and except as readers there is no going back to Tolstoy and Dickens. As the Russian writer Evgeny Zamyatin was already saying in the 1920's (in his essay *On Literature, Revolution and Entropy*): "Euclid's world is very simple and Einstein's world is very difficult; nonetheless, it is now impossible to go back to Euclid's" (Barth 1984: 202)

Much more has happened since Barth wrote this in the 1980's and the growing amount of scientific understanding, paradoxically brought to our awareness the fact that reality and the world we live in are vastly incomprehensible and inexplicable as of now. Being aware of one's ignorance is the beginning of the process of attaining awareness. Magical realist novels come in handy in that respect because they

highlight and question our unconscious and uncritical tendency to take things for granted as if we are living in Euclid's time. As of now we cannot prove that there are Golden eye mongooses, and yet all the developments we have witnessed in the last decades should bring to our attention the possibility that maybe reality is not as mundane and boringly predictable as we used to think; and this is a possibility I am willing to embrace fervently as well as to suspend my disbelief. The awareness of the limitations of our knowledge requires re-examining the theoretical approach to magical realist novels, which may turn out to be more truthful in their description of a magical reality freed from the confines of prejudiced ignorance.

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