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Magic Realism and Shahnameh of Ferdowsi

Mahin Shamsayi¹

Abstract

Magic realism, a concept that has been recognized in the world's literary schools since the third decade of the twentieth century, still has a large number of advocates. It is read across the world with interest. Although the most prominent works of magic realism are those of Latin America, good examples of such work can also be found in other countries. Based on the new theory in the literary school, the first works appeared with the characteristics of magic realism are not the works of Latin American or European writers and have not been written in the present era, but is related to the world and oriental literature. In the ancient oriental myths and epics, such as *One Thousand and One Nights* stories and the epical and mythic *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi one can also seek for traces of magic realism. The author of this research, after providing the definitions and attributes of magic realism has examined its origins in the Persian literature and *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi and has remarked the most fundamental common points of these two styles which are indeed, the use of magic, legend and myth.

Keywords: Magic realism, Orient, Shahnameh, Myth, Magic, Legend.

¹ Faculty Member of Farhangian University. E-mail: Shamsaee45@yahoo.com

Introduction

Magic realism appeared as a modern style in story-writing during the third decade in the twentieth century. The place of birth of this style is Latin America and the authors of this region have become the cause for its recognition with their works of story and by their critical and imaginary writings which are associated with the long-term suppression and the ruling of repressive and dictatorial atmosphere and colonial and internal dictatorships, as well as a strong desire to tell the people of this land and to narrate their own histories, all these areas have led to the growth of a certain kind of realism that Latin American writers have consciously chosen in their literary activities for public opinion awakening.

Magic realism had a tendency toward the myths and legends of its nations which was trying to show the irrational world, assuming the default setting aside of the bourgeois of the West, a phenomenon which was created by the indirect exploitation of the writers from the mythologies (*The Difference Between Magic Realism and Amazing Realism and the Role of Point of View in Them*, p, 20).

Mythologies are neither fantasy nor without order, but they are a systematic way of thinking and based on one definition they are “logical”. They are our ancestors’ ways of thinking that are expressed through symbols and signs. However, if the “truth” that a myth expresses is not the same objective or scientific truth, at least, it is a true description. To put it another way, although today the signs and symbols of mythology are considered to be unreal, however, their narrators have described the facts that they believe by combining these symbols and signs (*An Introduction to the Structure of the Legendary Book of Shahnameh*, p. 218). According to Rayvarz Scoonie, magic realism is an interpretation of the reality of today’s world which blends together the elements from the logical elements of European civilization and the irrational elements of the primitive Latin America. Another point worth noting is that in the structure of mythologies and magic realism, the non-rationality of the events is such that they seem completely true and believable. In the view of phenomenology of myth, Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) imagines myth as a completely true being and regards this expression as a narrative of the gods, the angels and, in general, considers them as supernatural creatures. In other words, perhaps one can state that the mythical character of credibility in the structure of our language is what makes us consider it as true (*Myth of Magic Realism*, p. 161). In this story writing style, the real and fictional elements are so interwoven that practically it becomes difficult to diagnose them from one another. Although the reader in the stories of magic realism is confronted by unusual and fictional themes or elements of

magic and dream, but his relationship with reality will never be interrupted during the story. That is the author who is an obstacle to the story's atmosphere to getting into mere and boring imagination, and suspension is held by surreal and magic themes; thus, the author of such stories, by removing the existing boundaries between the reality and imagination, puts the reader ahead of magic realism. The daily reality of man's life is combined with the unrealistic and imaginary world and creates an unexpected or ambiguous ending. This mixture of reality and imagination reflects the indigenous culture of the country (*The Difference Between Magic Realism and Amazing Realism and the Role of Point of View in Them*, p. 21).

Needless to say, depending on the times and cultures and different conditions, the definition of reality and sur-reality is different. In other words, these two elements are considered relative phenomena and every reality is not a reality everywhere and every sur-reality is not a sur-reality for ever. If the stories of magic realism are analyzed from the point of view of the reader, the difference of the cultures and the eras is itself a factor for the difference in perception and definition of reality. An issue might be considered as absolute reality in one culture in an era, and in another era or culture it might be located in the range of imaginations. But from the viewpoint of the author and the fictional characters, issues such as the spirit, dream, the magic that the reader might know them as unreal, is not unreal, illusion and dream, but is a part of the world of the characters of the story and the world. In this regard, Doctor Cirus Shamisa states:

Magic realism is not mere fantasy; but the fantasy and reality are mixed together in it. It can be said to the credit of the author or its antagonist (who have mythological opinions and look to the heart of the supernatural events) it is realism but to the reputation of the reader it is surreal and magic, thus, overall, it is a mixture of realism and anti-realism together, all the art of the writer is to make such context and situation which may result in the tension between these two elements in completion of the mind of the reader and give the reader a sense of realism (*Literary Schools*, 2011, p. 245).

In a more general view, due to its tendency towards superstitious beliefs, mythical events, fantasy and dream, magic realism is a kind of genre favored by the people. The unreal but believable and acceptable events of magic realism lay myth, has made it greatly popular among the people.

The Origins of Magic Realism in *Shahnameh*

Early traces of magic realism where myths and legends are closely interconnected can be found in *One Thousand and One Nights* and in the heritage of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and Iranian mythology and legend.

The prominent works of Persian literature, such as Saadi's *Bustan*, *Ghazals* of Hafiz, *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi and the stories of *A Thousand and One Nights* since the seventeenth century with the diverse itineraries and travel logs and European couriers or travelers especially Jean Chardin (1643 –1713) and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689) which travelled to Iran and the Safavid kings made the Western world acquainted with Persian literature and poetry. The literary style of Romanticism and writers and poets associated with this style greatly under the influence of the Orient, particularly Iran and tried to get inspiration from the Iranian sources.

The first great Iranian poet who attracted the attention of European writers and poets was Saadi. In the eighteenth century, "Francois Voltaire" inspired by the introduction of *Bustan* that he had read in the travel log of Chardin, said a poem in the French language (from Saadi to Aragon, p. 78). Denis Diderot (1713-1784), one of the great writers of the Enlightenment era and the Encyclopedia, translated a piece of *Gulestan* into French (ibid, p. 88). Abe Blanche another French writer in 1784, inspired by Saadi published a set to the name eastern fable and fiction (ibid, p. 90). A thousand and one night stories was translated into English in the eighteenth century and quickly attracted the attention of world countries and in France from 1704 to 1768 was printed more than 70 editions (ibid, 100) to the extent that even some critics, have called it the adoptive mother of the English novel (Iranian Legends and Stories in the English Literature, p. 51).

The second Iranian poet who captivated the attention of European writers and lovers of the culture was Ferdowsi. Chardin was the first European who knew the poet of *Shahnameh* and gives us this knowledge that this epic has had a large number of readers across Asia (from Saadi to Aragon, 1996, p. 249). Louis Langz was the first French orientalist who realized the greatness of Ferdowsi's work and its poetic value and regarded him as great as Homer. He has stated: "*Shahnameh* is so beautiful and the Persian language is so harmonious with the nature whose translations to any language will still be soft and have its appeal" (ibid, p. 251). The Swedish symbolist playwright Maurice Maeterlinck (1863-1949), has taken the most famous themes of fictional dramas, *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1892) from

Shahnameh (ibid, p. 278). Translation of the first volume of *Shahnameh* by Julius von Mohl (1800-1876) had such influence in the literary meetings of Europe that one of the professors of the Sorbonne University in 1893 said, “*Shahnameh* is one of the greatest works that human genius has created” (ibid, p. 258).

In this regard, it can be said that the roots of the first school of magic realism which was created in the third decade of the twentieth century in Latin America, was not in the West but in the oriental lands of the world such as Iran which is the birth place of many of the myths and legends. Confession of the most famous writers of magic realism to this point is itself evidence to this claim.

This school has sometimes been called the school specific to the third-world countries. As late Sayed Husseini has written this attribution about fifty years ago by saying that the above-cited school is still in its infancy and has considered it as an investigation in the strange associations of the nation’s primary mind that is completely alien to the culture of the West. A school has been integrated with the native mythologies present in the daily realities of the nations of Latin America and has created its own world while being dedicated to each of the nations in the future some common traits may be found (Schools of Literature, vol. 1, p. 318). However, the before-cited prediction was correct; as not only common streaks of these schools in various Latin American writers appeared, but in other countries that have had a strong popular culture also appeared and emerged.

Although the most prominent works of magic realism are from the writers of Latin America, good examples of this work can also be found in the rest of the world. For instance, in the dictionary of literary terms of M. J. Abrams, under the title of Magic Realism, names of writers such as Gunter Grass from Germany, John Fowles from Britain, Italo Calvino from Italy and Milan, Kundera from Czech Slovakia, has been mentioned along with the names of authors such as Marquez and Burgess as magic realist writers. Besides, this wave arrived in Iran before the Islamic Revolution and was greatly welcomed. Therefore, the experienced or even novice writers of that day also started creating works and experiences of this style. According to a more recent theory of literary school, the first, with the characteristics of magic realism did not emerge from the writers of Latin America or Europeans and they are not written in the present century, but they are concerned with the distant past, in the world’s and the orient’s literature.

Although they have not hitherto been mentioned as magic realism, but according to the tangible structural characteristics of these works from the point of view of classification of literary genres, they are included in this type. In the ancient orient's mythology, such as Gilgamesh or Ferdowsi's epic, traces of magic realism can also be seen (Magic Realism Fantastic Reality, p. 34).

Combining real-world and supernatural world has not been particular to the modern era, but perhaps in the past centuries with regard to the sociocultural and scientific conditions governing the communities, has been greater than the present time. The oriental countries of the world such as Iran are the birthplace of many legends and myths which have become the themes for the works of many of the writers. Thus, it can be stated that the roots of the first styles of magic realism go back to not only Latin America but also it is very far distant. Admittance of the most famous writers of magic realism to this point is itself evidence to this claim. Burgess, Garcia Marquez, Isabelle Allende and Italo Calvino name *A Thousand and One Nights* in his background literature which has influenced their works (See *I Am Alive to Narrate*, 135), (Paola, p. 99), (*Persian Stories and the History of Modernity in Iran*, p. 97).

The affectability of magic realism writers from the Persian classical literature is indicative of what is called the streaks of magic realism should be searched in the texts which originate from the heart of the myths and the legends and in some way the heritage of Iranian mythologies. In this regard, one can point out *Shahnameh* as one of the most valuable legendary and epical works of Persian literature. The basic motif of *Shahnameh* consists of legends. Myths and legends of are closely interconnected with magic realism and using them in addition to the symbolic aspects of the text take the form of meta-reality. Basically, a large part of the mythologies form the amazing and fantastic elements and the things and the objects beyond the nature; although the myth in daily life means fanciful and unrealistic, but what makes them significant is the belief of believers in these mythologies that are expressed in the religious and cultural contexts (*Recognizing Iranian Mythology*, p. 24). In *Shahnameh*, victories, defeats, celebrations, warfare, ceremonies and customs of people are expressed in different ways and forms. Ferdowsi does his best when stating these cases to present a clearer and more accurate picture of the culture and original civilization of the Iranians –fearing that it would be forgotten. He tries all his best to save the ancient Iranian civilization that was exposed to death and annihilation, and remind it to come back to himself. In this effort, he tries to exploit all the manifestations present in the popular culture of that time.

Manifestations like love, compassion, magic, monster, fantasy, legend, myth and hundreds of other themes, one of the themes which that Ferdowsi has repeatedly mentioned and used in narrating the stories and happenings of *Shahnameh* are "magic and witchery and tales of demons and fairies".

According to the narrations of *Shahnameh*, Zakhāk is the symbol of witchcraft and Fereydoun is the destroyer of it. "The story of deception of Zakhāk by the demons" is considered as one of the most important instances of witchery in *Shahnameh*; he is first deceived by the devil and throws his father Merdas into the well and kills him for the greed of his kingdom. Once again, the devil appeared in the form of a cook and asked him to kiss the shoulders of the king and two snakes grow out of his kissing spot and once again he is deceived by the devil for the treatment of these two snakes; this time again the devil tricked him in disguise as a medical person and sees his remedy in eating the heads of the youth.

Another magical myth is related to the story of Kia; this story in *Shahnameh* is terminated with the disappearance of Kia at the spring after snow and storm. Somewhere else Afrasiab is also the embodiment of witchcraft; and the first story of witchery in *Shahnameh* is the story of Sudabeh, the malevolent woman of *Shahnameh*, after his demand is met with opposition by Siavash, Sudabeh fearing that lest the spies inform Kavous Shah, resorted to witching the woman. Also, Sudabeh attributes the passage of fire of Siavash to the witchery of Zaal; and Zaal by burning the feather of phoenix and demanding help from him took Rostam out of his mother's womb. The second Part Rostam and the fourth part involve fighting with woman witch. Also, the story of Ekvān Div tells about the fighting of Rostam with the witch demon. In the story of Rostam and Esfandiar also after Rostam was injured by Esfandiar, we saw the witchery of Zaal and the phoenix (*Witch and Witchery*, pp. 51- 53). And also there is the marriage of Rostam with Perry which takes place about Tahmineh which is a one-night marriage and without ceremony.

Of the other themes which make up the foundation of *Shahnameh*, is the myth and legendary basis which is of outstanding importance in *Shahnameh*. Task of myth is single out reality from the fantasies and collective dreams; thus, a nation that has no myths is without identity. The most ancient nations have the most beautiful myths. The most important topic of *Shahnameh* is the manifestation of the mythologies and the ancient Iranian culture in it; he has beautifully used the mythological stories to be reminiscent of the ancient culture in its community. According to Ferdowsi, attention to the mythical themes in the community is one

principle and is highly important for understanding the roots of identity and the nation. Ferdowsi lived at a time when there were no myth subjects; but due to the national interest in the mythical themes that were in danger of oblivion and the Iranian identity that was in danger of destruction, changed to myths and converted into *Shahnameh*. The overall theme in the mythologies of *Shahnameh* is the conflict of light versus darkness, or the good and the evil which is observed in most of the stories. There are many mythological characters in *Shahnameh* among which one can name Kiamars as the first king and as the first person who built houses for people and brought the Iranians civilization by discovering fire. Jamshid is another mythical character who is the founder of Iranian New Year in the memory of Iranians, the symbol of happiness, prosperity, and joy.

Zahhāk is one of the third mythologies of *Shahnameh* that is not a human in the mythological world, but is a demon and is in contact with the devil and the enemy of Iranian ancient culture. Fereydun is of the other myths that are in captivity of the killer of Zahhāk. Also, the old and white-haired Zaal is the symbol of old age and passage of time and his wonderful appearance shows that he has not grown normally and is grown in the mountains. Zaal is an unearthly character that is associated with the phoenix. Phoenix is a mythical figure that burns the feather of phoenix which is the symbol of divine help. Here, we observe the intervention of the gods in the earthly affairs and the wars which completely obvious in the mythologies of other nations, too.

Shahnameh is generally indicative of the struggle between light and darkness and this is observed from the beginning. Wherever there are forces of goodness like Fereydun and Jamshid, the powers of darkness like Zahhāk are busy fighting with them. In another part of *Shahnameh*, it is observed that from the marriage of Zaal with Rudabeh who is the daughter of the king of Kabul, Rostam is born who is the great hero of the mythical stories. Rostam with his special traits that has great mythical theme is not an ordinary person. He is more than five hundred years old and has lived since the time of Manuchehr until the time of Bahman. He is not born naturally and because of that they are forced to tear up the womb of Rudabeh; when he is born contrary to all the babies he laughs and this is an exception. His relationship with Zaal and the phoenix is unnatural, too. Zaal is himself a witch and has a long life and the phoenix is a mythical bird, too. These set the ground for Rostam's unnaturalness.

Siavash is also one of the other myths of *Shahnameh* which is counted as the gods and he is sacred. His story is one of the main obituaries of *Shahnameh*. Siavash is the symbol of

purity and salvation and he is known as the god of death and martyrdom. The death of Siavash has mythical perspective because after his martyrdom, a plant is grown out of his blood named Dracena (Siavashan). Kia, the son of Siavash, who is one of the Kiani Princes, is the last mythological figure of *Shahnameh*.

Kia is the only hero of *Shahnameh* who conquered Bahman fortress –the fortress of the pagans and extends the religion of Bahi. Kia is enthroned and for the period of forty years fights the Turanian. He is the savior of Iran and the finally puts an end into the life of Afrasiab; thereby Turan falls into the hands of Iranians. The interesting feature of his personality is that he has done an unusual and unearthly task and does not act like the earthly figures. One of his personality aspects is that he suddenly at the peak of power abdicates from power after sixty years of ruling and after one week of worshiping the God, says farewell by the commanders and heroes to the ruling and kingdom and sets off towards a spring at night and no trace is found of hi, and he remains immortal. Even his beautiful horse is also magical that Kia disappears from the looks after riding on the back of the horse and goes into the heavens which show that this horse also has unearthly and supernatural respect (*An Introduction to the Fundamental Mythologies of Shahnameh*, pp. 12-16).

Accordingly, one can search the roots and backgrounds of magic realism as a modern method of story writing in the classical literature of Persian language, especially in the epical and mythological genres. Such texts due to their narrative structures are appropriate arenas for displaying the amazing events that have tied them with sur-reality and have shown surprising similarities between these texts with the modern style of magic realism.

It is fitting that we end this article with the words of George Eliot who is in the opinion of most critics, the greatest English novelist:

There is no religious practice and obligation more natural than this bowing one's head to the orient with respect and reverence, because almost everything good that we possess- our most beautiful plants, our most noble animals, the most beautiful flowers, arts, religions, philosophical schools, even our love poems and our love stories- all of them have come from the Orient to us. Both historically as well as based on the natural law, the Orient is mourning" (A glimpse into the influence of the Orient on the western literature, Science and schools of philosophy, p. 28).

Conclusion

Because of the linking of magic realism with the legends, the myths, the native stories and the supernatural beliefs on the one hand and exploitation of classic literature, on the other hand, streaks of magic realism can be found in the Persian literary texts, particularly Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. Admittance of the great writers of this genre to familiarity and employing the literary texts of the orient is true evidence of the existence of the source of principles of magic realism in this region. Based on what has been mentioned so far, the roots and backgrounds of magic realism as a modern way in story writing should be looked for in the Persian classic literature especially the epic and mythological genre. Such texts due to their narrative structures are suitable arenas for the entrance of amazing events which has tied them with meta-reality and has displayed wonderful similarity between these texts and the modern style of magic realism. Reality and meta-reality are not the same everywhere depending on the various languages, cultures, and circumstances, in other words, these two elements are relative phenomena and every reality is not a reality everywhere and every meta-reality is not constantly a meta-reality. Our ancestors' way of thought is expressed through symbols and signs. However, if 'truth' that a myth defines is not the practical or objective truth, it is at least, descriptive truth. This means that although today the signs and the symbols of mythology can be considered unrealistic, however, their narrators, by combining these symbols, have described the truth that they believed in.

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