



Foregrounding Techniques in Contemporary Magical Realism Short Fiction: A Stylistic Study of Characterization and Setting

Issa Safaa Issa Hassan

University of Maysan, College of Basic Education, Department of English Language

issasafaa@uomisan.edu.iq

Abstract

This paper studies the use of foregrounding techniques in contemporary magical realism short fiction. It focuses on how these stylistic elements enrich the elements of characterization and setting to critique societal norms and human psychology. This could be done through analyzing Gabriel García Márquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," J.G. Ballard's "The Drowned Giant," Salman Rushdie's "The Man Who Danced With Dolls," and Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch," the study reveals how these authors employ defamiliarization, symbolism, and metaphorical language to blur the lines between reality and the supernatural. (Flores, 1995, p.125)

These techniques not only boost the surreal elements within the narratives but also highlight underlying social and psychological tensions related to issues such as cultural identity, alienation, gender dynamics, and societal indifference. (Hart, 2010, p.23).

This paper demonstrates the power of magical realism as a genre that compels readers to reconsider the ordinary and the extraordinary while addressing complex contemporary themes.

The study's findings contribute to literary stylistics and genre analysis, offering valuable insights for scholars and educators interested in the intersections of narrative form, social critique, and the unique stylistic contributions of magical realism (Bowers, 2004, p.17).

Keyword

Magical realism, Foregrounding, Defamiliarization, Symbolism, Metaphorical language.

Received: 02/10/2025

Accepted: 19/10/2025

Published: March /2026



تقنيات الإبراز في القصة القصيرة الواقعية السحرية المعاصرة: دراسة أسلوبية في بناء الشخصيات والمكان

م. عيسى صفاء عيسى حسن

قسم اللغة الانجليزية , كلية التربية الأساسية , جامعة ميسان

issasafaa@uomisan.edu.iq

المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في توظيف تقنيات الإبراز (foregrounding techniques) ضمن القصة القصيرة ذات الطابع الواقعي السحري المعاصر، مركزةً على كيفية إسهام هذه التقنيات الأسلوبية في إثراء بناء الشخصيات وتشكيل المكان بوصفهما وسيلتين نقديتين للكشف عن البنى الاجتماعية والنفسية في النص الأدبي.

وقد تم تحليل أربع قصص مختارة تمثل هذا الاتجاه، هي: «رجل عجوز بجناحين هائلين» لغابرييل غارسيا ماركيز، و*«العلاق الغارق»* لـ ج. بالارد، و*«الرجل الذي رقص مع الدمى»* لسلمان رشدي، و*«غرزة الزوج»* لكارمن ماريا ماتشادو.

تكشف الدراسة كيف يوظف هؤلاء الكتاب الاغتراب الفني، والرمزية، والاستعارة بوصفها آليات فنية لتقويض الحدود بين الواقعي والمتخيل، وإعادة تقديم العالم المؤلف في صورة غريبة ومفاجئة. وتُظهر النتائج أن هذه التقنيات لا تقتصر على تعزيز البعد السريالي في السرد، بل تسهم أيضًا في إبراز التوترات الاجتماعية والنفسية المرتبطة بقضايا الهوية الثقافية، والاعتراب، والعلاقات الجندرية، واللامبالاة المجتمعية.

وتؤكد الدراسة في الختام على قوة الواقعية السحرية كنوع أدبي يعيد تشكيل العلاقة بين المؤلف وغير المؤلف، من خلال معالجته قضايا معاصرة معقدة بلغة رمزية واستعارات مكثفة. كما تُسهم نتائجها في إثراء مجال الأسلوبية الأدبية وتحليل الأجناس السردية، مقدّمةً منظورًا نقديًا يمكن أن يفيد الباحثين والدارسين المهتمين بنقاطات الشكل السردية والنقد الاجتماعي والإبداع الأسلوبية في الواقعية السحرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الواقعية السحرية، الإبراز، الاعتراب، الرمزية، الاستعارة

تاريخ النشر: آذار / ٢٠٢٦

تاريخ القبول: ١٩ / ١٠ / ٢٠٢٥

تاريخ الاستلام: ٢٠٢٥/١٠/٠٢



1. Preliminaries

1.1 Introductory Background

The literary genre of magical realism combines elements of the fantastic with the real. It allows the supernatural element to coexist seamlessly with everyday life realities. This genre is associated with Latin American Literature but it has spread to and influenced contemporary short fiction worldwide. (Bowers, 2004, p.17).

According to Bowers (2004), "magical realism presents the miraculous as an ordinary part of reality, blending the mundane and the mystical" (p. 17)

This paper argues that juxtaposition renders magical realism a fertile area for studying foregrounding techniques. Foregrounding techniques are stylistic devices used by writers of literature to draw the readers' attention to consider certain elements in the literary texts in order to enrich their prominence and impact on the readers' experience.

Mukařovský (1964) defines foregrounding as "the deviation from expected language norms to enhance literary effect, bringing certain elements into sharp focus". (p.20).

Foregrounding techniques in magical realism literature are evident in stylistic choices in characterization and setting, such as unexpected or exaggerated language, and bring out the mystical in the mundane. By examining how these techniques develop characters settings, this paper aims to show the stylistic intricacies that contribute to the distinctive experience of magical realism. (Mukařovský, 1964, p.20)

1.2 Aim and Significance of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of foregrounding techniques in contemporary magical realism short fiction. It focuses on how these techniques shape characterization and setting. This stylistic approach provides insights into how magical realism authors emphasize the magical within everyday life so as to produce a unique blend that invites the readers to reimagine reality. (Hart, 2010, p.23).

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the analysis of magical realism as a genre, with a specific emphasis on stylistic techniques that define the reading experience and the psychological depth of character and place. (Flores, 1995, p.126)



This study offers a valuable contribution to literary stylistics and genre analysis, providing scholars, educators, and students with tools to understand how magical realism exploits foregrounding to enrich narrative meaning and foster critical reflection on contemporary social issues. (Bowers, 2004, p.17)

1.3 Selection of Data for Analysis

The present paper has selected four stories as data for analysis,

"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" by Gabriel García Márquez.

The elements of magical realism in this short story are seen in the character of an old man who is depicted by the writer as having wings. It seems that the writer of this short story wants to blur the boundaries between the human and the supernatural. (Márquez, 1955, p.2)

"The Drowned Giant" by J.G. Ballard

J.G. Ballard challenges perceptions of reality. He employs the unexpected appearance of a giant's body on a beach as a setting where reality and myth converge. (Ballard, 1964, p.11)

"The Man Who Danced With Dolls" by Salman Rushdie

This short story from East, West uses characterization and setting to explore cultural identity and the supernatural in an everyday context. (Rushdie, 1989, p.78)

"The Husband Stitch" by Carmen Maria Machado

In this short story, the writer examines gender roles and folklore in a modern setting, where the protagonist's fantastical experiences foreground internal and societal conflicts. (Machado, 2017, p.67)

These four magical realism short stories have been selected as data for analysis because the writer of this paper believes that each story exemplifies magical realism's stylistic elements. The elements of characterization and setting take on magical features to provide a foundation for analyzing foregrounding techniques. (Flores, 1995, p.125)



2. Analysis

To achieve the aim of analyzing foregrounding techniques in contemporary magical realism short fiction has made it necessary on the part of the writer of this paper to focus on the stylistic elements that enrich the elements of characterization and setting to create a surreal atmosphere. Each one of the selected short stories exploits language, symbolism, and stylistic choices that urge the readers to experience familiar worlds through heightened, often unsettling, supernatural lenses. The following is a detailed look at how each story utilizes foregrounding in characterization and setting, accompanied by significant citations quoted from the analyzed short stories for illustration.

2.1. "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" by Gabriel García Márquez

Gabriel García Márquez uses defamiliarization to foreground the character of the old man who is portrayed as a surreal yet grounded figure with "enormous wings." The writer describes the man as "dirty and half-plucked, with feathers like those of a dying rooster" in order to challenge the typical association with angelic purity. (Márquez, 1955, p.2)

Márquez exploits this technique to place the readers in a position where they must reconsider their own perceptions of divinity and the supernatural.

The old man does not land in a holy place; on the contrary, he lands in a filthy courtyard which is described by García Márquez as "a muddy backyard among the crabs and the chicken coop." This grounding of a fantastical being in a mundane, almost squalid, setting blurs the boundaries between the divine and the ordinary, foregrounding the incongruity of the magical realism genre. García Márquez uses this contrast of placing the extraordinary within the framework of poverty and rural life in order to force the readers to question what is normal in such a world.

We may cite the following lines from the short story

"He was dressed like a rag picker. There were only his wings to distinguish him from a human being."

"He must have been coming for the child, but the poor fellow is so old that the rain knocked him down."

These examples demonstrate that García Márquez foregrounds not only the old man's physical description but also the townspeople's reaction, who view him as a curiosity rather than a miracle. (Hart, 2010, p.23)



2.2 "The Drowned Giant" by J.G. Ballard

In "The Drowned Giant" Ballard uses foregrounding techniques in the elements of characterization and setting. He uses stark clinical descriptions of an enormous, dead body washed up on a beach. The enormous corpse is pictured by the short story writer with an eerie detachment in order to be able to foreground a societal commentary on desensitization and objectification. The story's setting which is a normal, tranquil beach is transformed by the presence of a giant. Clearly, the purpose is to provide a transitional location in which the mundane and the mythical intersect so as to arouse a feeling of awe and dread in the readers.

Ballard uses symbolism and detailed imagery as primary techniques. The giant's body is initially revered but gradually becomes part of the landscape so as to desensitize the onlookers. This transformation from a mystical being to ordinary object underscores society's tendency to dehumanize the extraordinary. (Ballard, 1964, p.11)

The following excerpts cited from the short story:

"At first, the giant lay untouched in the sands, a vast supine figure; his arms flung back, the head half buried."

"Within a week, sections of flesh were cut away and displayed as souvenirs..."

To illustrate the change from reverence to the morbid commodification of the body foregrounds the way society exploits and trivializes even the most phenomenal occurrences. Ballard's use of passive tone in these descriptions enriches the sense of inevitable decay and objectification, framing the giant as a part of the scenery rather than an individual or a miracle.

2.3 "The Man Who Danced With Dolls" by Salman Rushdie

In this short story, Rushdie examines identity and otherness so as to blur the line between the supernatural and the deeply personal. The protagonist is described by the writer as navigating his own identity by means of an unsettling relationship with dolls that come to life. This is a metaphor for displacement and cultural hybridity. Rushdie's magical realism here is employed as a mirror to the internal conflict of his characters, foregrounding how cultural traditions and identities shape and haunt them.

Rushdie employs metaphorical language to foreground characterization. He depicts the protagonist's dancing with dolls as a surreal enactment of cultural and personal identity. The setting which is a mundane, familiar room filled with



animate dolls heightens the tension between the ordinary and supernatural in order to emphasize themes of isolation and alienation. (Rushdie, 1989, p.78)

The following lines are cited from the short story:

“They watched him with eyes that should have been glass but glimmered with a living intensity.”

“He danced with his dolls, a lone figure spinning in the dimly lit room.”

To show that by locating the supernatural within a personal, almost intimate setting, Rushdie foregrounds the character’s sense of entrapment within cultural expectations. It seems that the short story writer wants to involve the readers into a surreal and deeply personal experience of identity and dislocation. (Flores, 1995, p.126)

2.4 "The Husband Stitch" by Carmen Maria Machado

Machado in this short story foregrounds societal gender dynamics by means of blending folklore and visceral realism. The author portrays the protagonist’s experiences in a confusingly familiar setting in which the tension between her inner life and societal roles becomes obvious.

The use of second-person narration (‘you might find this story uncomfortable, but I am telling you anyway’) foregrounds intimacy with the reader, emphasizing the universal nature of the protagonist’s conflict. (Machado, 2017, p.67)

The protagonist’s insistence that her ribbon must not be removed can be interpreted as a strong symbol of identity and bodily autonomy, highlighting a clash between individual agency and societal expectation.

The following lines cited from the short story:

“The ribbon is not a part of my body, but it is a part of me.”

“When he touches the ribbon, a shiver goes through me.”

This is clear evidence that the author foregrounds the ribbon as a motif of feminine agency that challenges patriarchal control? Machado’s focus on the protagonist’s internal sensations and her controlled, almost clinical tone juxtaposed with raw emotion demonstrates her struggle to keep her individuality in the face of relational demands, making her both relatable and unsettlingly enigmatic. (Elliott, 2019, p.45)



In summary, the above analysis has provided evidence that each short story writer uses foregrounding to improve the elements of magical realism in characterization and setting to produce multiple interpretations that urge the readers to question the nature of reality, identity, and societal norms. The juxtaposition of the ordinary with the supernatural and the use of defamiliarization, symbolism, and metaphor are central to establishing magical realism's unique perspective on contemporary issues:

- In "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings", Márquez questions human responses to the divine by the characterization of an angelic figure in a commonplace fashion.
- In "The Drowned Giant", Ballard criticizes desensitization and objectification by the detached description of a giant corpse.
- In "The Man Who Danced with Dolls", Rushdie examines cultural hybridity and alienation by using the protagonist's interactions with dolls as a metaphor for cultural conflict.
- In "The Husband Stitch", Machado explores gender roles and personal autonomy with a visceral portrayal of the protagonist's body and her symbolic ribbon.

All in all, these magical realism short stories demonstrate how magical realism foregrounds character and setting to create compelling narratives that critique and illuminate societal and personal conflicts.



3. Discussion

In literary stylistics, foregrounding is usually defined as the use of language by fiction writers in such a way as to make some elements of the literary text stand out in order to draw the readers' attention to certain features of characterization, setting or even themes. Foregrounding in the genre of magical realism obscures the demarcation line between what is considered real and what is considered supernatural. The result is a dream-like or a mysterious quality which urge the readers to question their own interpretation of the world. (Mukařovský, 1964, p.20)

The writer of this study has examined how each selected magical realism short story writer uses foregrounding methods to produce multi-dimensional characters and settings that go beyond traditional realism by creating narratives that deal with identity, alienation, societal indifference and gender dynamics. (Flores, 1995, p.125)

The analysis has shown that each magical realism author foregrounds his characters and settings by making the bizarre appear vivid and oddly plausible. By means of using defamiliarization, symbolism and metaphorical language each author improves the readers' awareness of how extraordinary elements overlap with ordinary human experiences which are related to personal and societal conflicts.

In "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" Márquez exemplifies foregrounding by using defamiliarization as a technique to present the bizarre as ordinary. The "old man with wings" is described in ordinary and even sordid terms, his wings are "dirty and half-plucked" rather than majestic, and he is "dressed like a rag picker," which contrasts sharply with traditional imagery of angels or supernatural beings. This image blurs the line between the divine and the worn-out in order to push the readers to question the villagers' (and, by extension, societies) lack of empathy and reverence for what could be a miraculous figure. The setting, a "muddy backyard" filled with crabs, further grounds the supernatural within the mundane, creating a tension that invites the readers to reflect on the villagers' selfishness and spiritual emptiness. The setting thus functions as a metaphor for moral neglect, foregrounding a lack of compassion in the human responses to the divine. (Hart, 2010, p.23)

In "The Drowned Giant" Ballard foregrounds societal desensitization by using a clinical and detached description of a giant 'corpse'. The dead body is washed up on a beach and little by little transformed from an object of awe into a commodity.



It is easy to realize that the way the short story writer describes the giant is aimed at depriving the readers of any feeling of wonder; Ballard's description is given in anatomical and scientific words. In a short time, the people begin to lose their esteem for the giant and so they start collecting the body parts of the giant as keepsakes. Here, the writer wants to stress the society's inclination to exploit and objectify.

The writer demonstrates this people's change of attitude by the foregrounding of the language which he uses to describe the giant like a specimen and not a character with agency. The beach setting, a location where the sea meets the shore is a symbolic place for the confluence of life and death, myth and reality. It seems that by foregrounding this shift, the writer wants to demonstrate that humans trivialize and dissect even an awe-inspiring phenomenon in order to reduce them to consumable articles that are empty of intrinsic worth. (Luckhurst, 2005, p.31).

Foregrounding is used in "The Man Who Danced with Dolls" by Rushdie to investigate themes of cultural hybridity and alienation. The protagonist's unusual dance with the animated dolls is employed by the author as a literal and a metaphorical image of the character's cultural alienation.

In order to produce a sense of the supernatural with an ordinary setting, Rushdie employs metaphorical language in which he portrays the dolls as beings "with eyes that should have been glass but glimmered with a living intensity." This depiction enlivens the dolls to show figuratively the protagonist's entanglement within his cultural heritage, as he is haunted by traditional figures that shape and imprison him. The writer transforms the ordinary setting i.e. a dimly lit room, by the presence of these "living" dolls, to stress his isolation.

It is clear that the short story writer foregrounds the bizarre interaction between man and doll in order to implicate his readers into the protagonist's internal conflict as a way to emphasize how the supernatural acts as an expression of internal struggles with identity and belonging.

In the short story "The Husband Stitch" by Machado, gender dynamics and societal restrictions are foregrounded by means of the protagonist's symbolic ribbon, which she protects vehemently and insists that it should not be removed.

It can be seen that the ribbon is used by the short story writer as a motif of female autonomy and mystery in order to urge his readers to face issues that are about autonomy of the body and gendered expectations.



The second person point of view is used by the author to enrich the foregrounding by directly addressing the reader so as to produce an uncomfortable intimacy that mirrors the protagonist's experiences of control and invasion. The way in which the protagonist deals with her husband who insists on tying the ribbon shows clearly the conflict between personal agency and societal expectation. (Elliott, 2019, p.45).

This struggle is shown manifestly in the setting of her own home. It is evident that home is usually looked upon as a safe place but instead we can see that it becomes a place of vulnerability.

The short story writer uses vivid sensory descriptions, such as the protagonist's reaction to her husband touching the ribbon ("a shiver goes through me"), as a way to foreground the tension between desire and control. This style emphasizes the restrictive expectations placed on women, while the ribbon itself stands for a personal and mystical feature of the protagonist's identity.

A careful reading of magical realism literature would reveal that the elements of setting and characterization often play dual roles. These elements are usually used by magical realism writers to place their readers in a familiar reality but at the same time the writers introduce an element of the surreal. This situation produces a narrative style that confronts societal norms by presenting them in an unfamiliar artistic form. For example, the depiction of the angel-like figure by Márquez in a common village setting compels his readers to question how society perceives the divine and the supernatural. In the same way, we observe how Ballard describes the giant's body on the beach, gradually changed into a disagreeable artifact in order to foreground how easily society can strip even the fantastic of its wonder and dignity. Rushdie's and Machado's short stories also place the bizarre within the everyday in order to enable the supernatural to show hidden aspects of cultural and gender conflicts.

It is evident that it is obvious for any careful reader that these short stories carefully employ the element of setting as a bridge between reality and fantasy in order to demonstrate the internal or societal conflicts represented by the characters. By presenting these settings in unfamiliar forms, the authors encourage their readers to see beyond surface realities and contemplate on deeper psychological or social issues. For example, Rushdie's use of the dimly lit room and Machado's use of the domestic setting serve as symbols for isolation and control. Also, the beach in Ballard's story is a reflection of humanity's ambivalence toward the unknown.



The writer of this paper has demonstrated that magical realism literary writers use the technique of foregrounding to beautify the magical realist experience and to critique societal norms and expectations as well. We see that Márquez and Ballard critique societal indifference and exploitation; Rushdie tackles themes of cultural identity, and Machado addresses the constraints placed upon women. By means of using certain styles that emphasize certain details, these authors confront their readers with the consequences of societal behaviors such as becoming indifferent to suffering, emotionally insensitive to the extraordinary, erasing cultural identity, and controlling female autonomy. (Brennan, 1989, p.54).

In all these magical realism short stories, it is obvious that the use of foregrounding makes each writer able to implant these critiques within a magical realist mode in order to enrich their impact by making the critiques seem almost organic to the narrative's bizarre events. For instance, Márquez uses the villagers' maltreatment of the winged old man as a commentary on human insensitivity; Ballard's description of the giant's commodification is aimed at criticizing consumerism; Rushdie's animated dolls are aimed at demonstrating cultural estrangement, and Machado's ribbon is used as a symbol for personal autonomy in a society that is eager to control.

All in all, in these analyzed magical realism short stories foregrounding is used to amalgamate the familiar with the fantastic in order to produce magical realist narratives that clarify societal and personal conflicts. Each author employs certain stylistic techniques to produce a disaccord between reality and fantasy in order to invite the readers to engage with themes of alienation, exploitation, cultural hybridity, and gender dynamics. Magical realism in which the ordinary and the extraordinary are blended enables a form of social critique, where foregrounding highlights character and setting in ways that reveal the complexities and contradictions of contemporary life. The writer of this paper has demonstrated how foregrounding in magical realism short fiction serves may be employed as a narrative technique and a means of challenging the reader's perceptions of reality and morality; thus, the genre of magical realism has been positioned as a powerful tool for addressing social issues.



4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the use of foregrounding techniques in contemporary magical realism short fiction may be employed as sharp stylistic tools to boost characterization and setting while at the same time facilitating complex social critique. The analysis of the selected short stories has demonstrated how magical realism authors use the supernatural to reformulate familiar human experiences to reveal underlying societal, cultural, and psychological conflicts. (Flores, 1995, p.125).

This study has shown that each magical realism author employs the technique of foregrounding by blending vivid and disturbing imagery with the surreal in order to produce narratives that urge their readers to see beyond surface realities. For example, Márquez critiques societal indifference and spiritual desensitization; Ballard exposes humanity's exploitative instincts; Rushdie delves into cultural identity and alienation, and Machado addresses gender dynamics and autonomy. (Machado, 2017, p.67)

By using unfamiliar artistic forms, symbolism, and metaphorical language, the authors stress important elements of characterization and setting that make the supernatural credible and integral to the critique.

It is fair to say that the writer of this study has given evidence that the use of foregrounding techniques in magical realism short fiction strengthens the surreal elements in these stories and frames them as reflections of societal issues. By presentation of the bizarre as part of the ordinary the authors of magical realism fiction attempt to encourage their readers to reconsider their perceptions of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the real and the imagined. In this way, foregrounding techniques in magical realist short fiction offer a distinctive means of engaging with contemporary issues in order to make the genre a powerful vehicle for both narrative innovation and social reflection. (Brennan, 1989, p.54).



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