

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

BLENDING MAGIC AND REALITY IN BORGES'S THE IMMORTAL: AN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Lt.Col. (R) Dr. Muhammad Shahab-Ud-Din Shah, Iqra Fida, Danyal Paracha, Awais Shafiq. Blending Magic And Reality In Borges's The Immortal: An Analytical Perspective -- PalArch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 20(2), 2076-2084. ISSN 1567-214x

Key Words: Jorge Luis Borges, The Immortal, Magical Realism, Mortality, Immortality, Identity, Space And Time, Real World, Irreducible Element, Merging Realism, Unsettling Doubts.

ABSTRACT

The paper aims to probe the application of magical realism in *The Immortal* a compelling short story by the celebrated Argentine author, Jorge Luis Borges. The essence of magical realism is explored as a literary genre, identifying its major tenets and discussing its implications in the narrative structure of the short story. The study uses the theoretical model presented by Faris (2004) to analyze five tenets – upsetting the received ideas about identity, space and time, the description of real world, irreducible element, merging realism and upsetting doubts – of magical realism. It is described how Borges deftly mingles the fantastical elements of immortality and an understudying transforming city into apparent ordinary world of *The Immortal*. The narrative structure of the short story moves ahead to probe into the complex web of themes of identity, mortality and the fluidity of time. In an engaging way, these themes are presented via the lens of magical realism. Furthermore, the study unveils how the author uses magical realism to question the understanding of the readers about reality. The study ends with

suggestion that Borges' utilization of magical realism expands beyond mere surreal representation while fostering a through interrogation of reality itself.

INTRODUCTION

The Immortal is a compelling short story by Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. The short story is highly regarded in the literary world and has got critical acclaim across the globe since its publication. Through a narrative embedded into magical realism, the author presents an immortal protagonist, travelling through time and space. He grapples with theme of identity, reality, memory and time, immortality, infinity and the fluidity of time. The fantastical encounters shatter the traditional concept of reality, tempting the readers to explore existence beyond the shackles of mortality. Though this short story is published in 1949, it has maintained its relevance over years,. The story has garnered a cult following among global literature and fans of Borges's work.

Magical realism, as a literary genre, blends the ordinary with the extraordinary and the real with the surreal. It creates a narrative space, transcending the boundaries of knowledge. As an exceptional practitioner Borages successfully presents the philosophical and metaphysical themes. The research paper aims to investigate the author's deft use of magical realism in this compelling story. As for the central focus of the story, the study will dissect how Borges uses magical realism as a vehicle to create a parallel reality within the story. As a result, the constraints of human understanding are, undoubtedly, challenged. Through a close reading of the thought-provoking story the study will identify the recurring motifs in the broader implications for grasping the author's oeuvre.

Statement of the Problem

It is found that literary works use magical realism in order to juxtapose the ordinary matters with the extraordinary matters. *The Immortal* is the short story which clearly manifests this as it mingles the fantastical with the mundane. Despite its fame, there is lack of research studies which explore how another employs this narrative technique to underscore the intricate themes, distorting reality. Such a gap hampers a thorough knowledge of the author's literary talent. The present study aims at filling this void because it will shed light on the another's narrative art in this domain.

Significance of the Study

The study holds significance because it offers a comprehensive analysis of the author's use of magical realism in *The Immortal*. While exploring the author's narrative art and the themes presented, it broadens our knowledge of his talented craft. Additionally, the study contributes to the broader discourse on magical realism, treating it a literary genre. The findings of the study will be beneficial to the literary scholars and the readers to plunge into the complex world of Borges's art of story-telling.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the use of magical realism in *The Immortal* to elucidate various themes of presented in the story.
2. To assess how Borges's use of magical realism challenges the conventional notions of reality.

Research Question

1. How does Borges employ magical realism in *The Immortal* to explore complex themes and challenge reality?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Carpentier (1949) coined the term 'Lo real maravilloso', meaning 'marvelous realism' – a precursor to magical realism. This concept uses fantasy in a real setting, disrupting the conventional view of reality (Chanday, 1985). Magical realism expresses the mysteries surrounding reality (Roh, 1925). Faris (1995) sees magical realism a strong current in the stream of post-modernism. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or co-existence, of possible worlds' spaces, systems that would be reconcilable in other modes of fiction (Zamora & Fairs, 1995).

As for the beginning of magical realism, Latin American culture is often quoted. In presenting magical realism, a writer creates the illusion of the unreal, pretends to escape from nature and recounts an action that, however explicable it may be, unsettles us with its strangeness (Imbert, 1975).

Ali's study (2023) assesses Muhammad Hanif's novel *Red Birds* (2018) through the perspective of post-colonial magical realism it is found that. Hanif juxtaposes fantastical elements within a real context. The technique of magical realism effectively critiques war, bringing out the ignored narratives of both the colonized and the colonizers in the context of the circumstances and aftermath of war.

The study conducted by Duth and Balakrishna (2017) assesses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in the terms of magical realism. Two perspectives – the magical and the real – are delineated in the novel. Although the novel is a work of fiction, its setting is real. It shatters the difference between the dead and the living. Through the mysterious character of Beloved, Morrison disrupts the conventional concept of reality.

Geetha's article (2010) explores the techniques of magical realism in Marques' *One Hundred Years of solitude*. Through the basic concepts of magical realism Marques describes the horrors of war, death and aftermath of war. In Columbia as presented by the author, myth and legend exist with modern technology. The novel poses the question to the readers what is real and what is unreal even in the realm of politics. Realism is observed by individuals in their own way. Through the tenets of magical realism. Marques offers reality which gives space to magic and religion.

Jabeen et al. (2022) explore magical realism in Ken Liu’s three short stories. Ken Liu’s is American writers of science fiction and fantasy. As for the framework, the study uses the model proposed by Faris (2004). The study uses textual and descriptive analysis of three short by Ken Liu in order to present find out the magical realism narration techniques and themes of these stories. In order to Chinese culture, Ken Liu deftly blends magical elements with real settings in a unique way.

Monga (2019) conducts a research study to evaluate Borge’s. *The Circular Ruins* from post-modern perspectives. The central focus of the story is on undefined reality, ending in nothingness. The narrator’s dream is described in detail. Instability and mutability are emphasized in the story. As for the in-depth analysis of reality, magical elements and reality are described in detail. The significant event in the story take place in the circular ruins of a temple. The phenomenal nature of dream and infinity are well-described by Borges in the story takes. Clarity never comes in Borgensian world.

Strecher’s study (1999) explores how Murakim Haruki has employed the concepts of magical realism in order to challenge notion of identity in Japan. While using the techniques of magical realism, Haruki exposes the decay of individual identity in the generation born after the Second World War.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employs the theoretical model presented by Faris (2004) to analyze five tenets – upsetting the received ideas about identity, space and time, the description of real world, irreducible element, merging realism and upsetting doubts – of magical realism.

Table 1: Major concepts in magical realism

Concepts	Defined
Irreducible Element	A fundamental part of a story that cannot be further simplified
Description of the Real World	The portrayal of people, places, and events as they exist in reality.
Unsettling Doubts	Uncertainties or questions in a narrative that disturb the reader's comfort or understanding.
Merging Realism	The blending of realistic and fantastical elements in a narrative.
Upsetting the Received Ideas About Time, Space and Identity	Challenging conventional notions about time (linear, finite), space (structured, limited), and identity (fixed, unique).

DATA ANALYSIS

1. Unsettling Doubts

As for the city of *The Immortals*, it is both a physical destination and a metaphorical concept. It is the final destination of the protagonist’s search - a

place believed to have the secret of immortality. In this way it become a tangible location which can be reached via physical travel to it. On the other hand, the city of the Immortals has its symbolic value. It stands for the unattainable nature of immortality - an elusive place. The protagonist doubts about the existence of the city demonstrate his ever0increasing disillusionment with the concept of immortality itself. The city of the Immortals becomes a paradox, reflecting the intricate nature of the protagonist quest and the philosophical questions it asks. The troglodytes, once human beings, have gone back to a positive condition, devoid of speech and civilization.

This transformation gives us a stark account of human regression, challenging our traditional knowledge of progress which is regarded as a linear process in the modern world. We, human beings are continuously advancing in technology, science and knowledge. But for the troglodytes the progress is not always linear or guaranteed. It raises the unsettling doubt that we can lose our humanity and regress to a more primitive situation. Seen intellectually and morally the troglodytes have no capacity for speech, thought and interaction. The philosophical questions arise: what makes us human? Does our ability to progress sustain civilization? What is the very nature of human existence?

The manuscript, through which the story is told, raises doubts about its authenticity. Is it a true account of the protagonist's experiences? If we accept it a true account, we are dragged into a world where we find possible immortality, non-linear time and regressive humanity. Such an interpretation creates doubts about reality, forcing us to confront deep philosophical questions about life, death and our existence on this globe. If the manuscript is considered a fabrication, the story told in it explores human condition on metaphorical level. The manuscript then becomes a philosophical treatise on the nature of existence. Whether taken as a true account or a fabrication, the manuscript becomes a powerful tool for creating unsettling doubts.

All events - the protagonist's surreal experiences, the transformation into an immortal, the encounter with other immortals, and the journey through the labyrinthine desert - raise unsettling doubts about the very nature of reality. What is real and what is unreal? Is reality like the labyrinth complex, and deceptive and confusing? With the passage of time the protagonist comes to know that reality is not fixed, having no objective entity. It becomes a subjective construct, shaped by our observations and experiences. What is real for us, may be unreal for others; and vice versa. If reality becomes subjective, can humans truly know the world in which they are placed. Whether considered an objective entity a subjective construct, reality becomes an enigma to us.

2. *Merging Realism*

It is Borges who has woven a complex tapestry of historical fact and imaginative fiction. The protagonist is Marcus Flaminius Refuse who is a tribune of the Roman Empire, acting as our anchoring point in this bygone era. *The Immortal* is set during the region of the roman Emperor Diocletian - a historical reality. But the protagonist sets out on a quest to find the city of the immortals. Thus, the realistic historical setting is merged into a fantastical element of city where

the inhabitants are immortal. The philosophical implications of this juxtaposition is worth-noticing. Immortality is an intricate concept, disrupting our fundamental understanding of life in this world.

As for the city of the Immortals, it combines fantastical and real elements. Its physical description makes it seem tangible and concrete. The use of specific, concrete adjectives offers description in reality. The city is sprawling in a visual and physical detail that the readers can picture. Such sensory details lend a sense of reality the streets, the windows, the door, the structures and stairways are the typical elements of real-world cities. As for the fantastical elements, the very name of the city of immortals is fantastical because it is beyond the realism of reality. Its maze-like structure denies logic. Such an architectural designs is difficult if not impossible:

There were corridors that led nowhere, unreachably high windows....., incredible upside down stair cases with upside-down treads and balustrades. Nine doors opened into that cellar-like place; eight led to a maze that returned, deceitfully, to the same chamber, the ninth led through another maze to a second circular chamber identical to the first. I am not certain how many chambers there were; my misery and anxiety multiplied them.

As for fantastical elements in the above excerpt, maze leads to the same place, implying physical impossibility. It challenges the spatial orientation and architecture. It looks to us that we are watching a mystery movie where hero and heroine are in a car, moving to roads which bring to the same petrol pump every time from where they were running. There are identical chambers, implying an exact replication of spaces is difficult to achieve in reality. There are uncertain number of chambers and nonlinear spaces, adding no direction, no orientation.

“Certainly, Borges was obsessed with labyrinth as a representation of human psyche. The mazes serve as a powerful metaphor for the complexities, twists and turns of our thoughts, emotions and inner recesses of minds. It stands for introspection and the quest for self-understanding in an intricate, non-linear process – a journey inward. Human psyche, like a maze, is a convoluted entity, full of subs-conscious desires, repressed feelings, and multifaceted layers of identity.

3. *Irreducible Element*

In Borges's *The immortal* the fundamental concept of immortality is a crucial, irreducible element. Without this concept, the whole narrative exists nowhere. The very concept becomes the major motive of the protagonist's journey. This idea can not be removed or simplified without changing the very nature of the story. It is the desire as old as humanity itself the search for unending life. It becomes a profound voyage into the realism of philosophy and existence. Immortality is the central melody in the symphony. It becomes both a question and an answer, the way and the destination, the night and the day. Without the concept of immortality, the whole short story will fade into the silent abyss of non-existences. The following extract will give an instance.

Everything in the world of mortals has the value of irrecoverable and contingent. Among the Immortals, on the other hand every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with visible beginning, and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in future, and *vertiginem*.

In the above excerpt, the perception of value in mortal and immortal existence serves as the unreducible element. There is the significance of the unrecoverable and contingent in human life. There, everything has its value because it is fleeting and uncertain – ephemerality and unpredictability. On the other hand every action or thought is the echo of the past as well as the presage of the future. Here the existence is non-linear – an un-ending cycle of echoing actions. Why do humans forget, “I’m mortal in Immortal”?

The protagonist experiences thorough solitude. This isolation becomes an irreducible element as it shapes his personality, his understanding of immortality, and his resultant “repulse as is shown in the following extract.

Incredulous, speechless, and in joy, I am once more mortal. In told myself over and over, again I am like all other men that night, I slept until daybreak. As for his solitude, it was both psychological and physical. It was not merely a circumstance, but a fundamental aspect of his existence regarding the narrative, impacting his experiences and observations.

4. *Description of the Real World*

In this short story, there are many references to real places, people and events which actually had their existence. These realistic backdrops add depth and authenticity to the story. They augment the narrative’s exploration of timeless philosophical and existential question. Tiresias in T.S. Eliot’s, *The Wasteland*, and the protagonist is everywhere, shattering the concepts of temporal and spatial bounds. What follows are some examples.

- i. In the autumns of 1066. I fought at Stanford Bridge....
- ii..... the seven voyages of Sindbad and the city of Brass.
- iii. In a courtyard of the prison in Samarkand....
- iv. In Bikanir I have taught astrology, as I have in Bohemia.
- v. In 1638 I was in Kolzver, and later in Leipsig.
- vi. In Aberdeen, in 1714, I subscribe to the six volumes of Pope’s *Iliad*.
- vii. On October 4, 1921, the Patna, which was taking me to Bombay. ..
- viii. I had also looked over the Red Sea When I was a Roman tribune.....

Borges also adds these elements from the real world. He gives references to classical literature and philosophy. He mentions Homer and *The Odyssey*. It demonstrates the protagonist’s education in a recognizable context. Even Pope’s ‘*Iliad* is also mentioned.

5. *Upsetting the Received Ideas about Time, Space and Identity*

These things were explained to me by Homer as one might explain things to a child. He also told me of his own old age and of that late journey he had made – driven, like Ulysses, by the intention to arrive at the nation of men that know

not what the sea is, that eat not salted meat... He lived for a century in the city of the Immortals.....

In the above extract of immortals Rufus meets however, the legendary Greek poet who should have died centuries before Rufus was born. The protagonist was a Roman tribune from the third century and Homer was in the eighth century BCE. Apparently, it illustrates the radical reimagining of time's nature – like time traveling, as watched in the movies.

As for space, Borges shatters the conventional ideas about space, as being structured and limited. For instance, the city of Immortals deviates the spatial deixis. There's no discernible order, logic or structure in its design. Upside-down stairways lead nowhere. Multiple structures are constructed in the same place. Streets loop back on themselves. All this creates a confusing situation which is chaotic, shattering all our spatial concepts.

The following passage from 'The Immortal' sums up the concept of identity regarding the context of immortality.

No one is someone, a single immortal man is all men, like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, hero, philosopher, demon, and the world – which is a long-winded way of saying that *I am not*.

It is evident that in the kingdom of Immortals, individual identities lose their distinctness. Given infinite time, an individual will eventually accumulate all experiences, thereby becoming "all men". Like the Renaissance humanist and magician, every immortal embodies all roles – "god, hero, philosopher, demon, and the world."

Then comes the provocative twist "which is long-winded was of saying that I am not. The individual identity is lost in the infinite sea of collective experience and existence. Here is in-depth philosophical analysis of identity. The question arises: what does identity truly mean in an immortal world?

CONCLUSION

In *The Immortal* Borges constructs an intricate web pregnant with real and unreal, inviting the readers into this enigmatic world. Though Borges treats immortality as a problem in ethics, the concept of immortality is equivalent to the narration of *The Immortal* (Bulter, 2012). The portrayal of immortality in the story serves a thorough paradox, challenging conventional thoughts about our existence on this planet. The fictional wrapping of the themes of reality, identity, time, space and immortality is inseparable from the themes. It has to be analyzed in relation to these themes. Like a magician. Borges reveals the secret of a trick at the end of a performance. Even the term magical realism is an oxymoron, suggesting a binary opposition between fantasy and realism. Blending of magic with realism serves a dual function. It creates a compelling narrative, accelerating the curiosity of the readers. Moreover, it plunges deep into existential themes. Borges deftly combines, the usual, with the unusual in. Such approach changes reading into an exploring adventure. The short story journeys between reality and fantasy, creating an intricate situation of opposite

elements. Indeed, this way of storytelling deviates from usual story-telling, adding depth of Borges's work and highlighting his contribution to magical realism.

Future research can use corpus linguistics in order to explore the patterns of magical realism employed by Borges in his works, especially its impact on the contemporary, literature. Furthermore, the exploration of cross-cultural interpretations through translated works can shed light on the basic tenets of magical realism. The data-driven approach can extend the readers' understanding of Borges' contribution this literary genre.

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