

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MAGICAL REALISM IN SOME NOVELS OF MURAKAMI HARUKI

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims to elucidate the transformation of the characteristics of Magical Realism (MR) in selected novels by Murakami. The research findings show that while the determination of the characteristics of MR in Murakami's works remains inconclusive, this article identifies the traces of magical realism within the framework of character systems and temporal and spatial dimensions. Additionally, the fantastic, surreal, and hyperreal tendencies are clarified to recognize the development of Murakami's ideological and artistic techniques. The comparative analysis with contemporary MR novels from Latin America and Vietnam serves to highlight the mythical cultural and aesthetic aspects of Murakami's work.

Keywords: transformation, Magical Realism, Murakami Haruki's novel, comparative analysis

TÓM TẮT

Bài viết hướng đến làm rõ sự biến đổi tính chất Hiện thực Huyền ảo trong một số tiểu thuyết của Murakami. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy, trong khi việc xác định tính chất Hiện thực Huyền ảo trong sáng tác của Murakami còn chưa thống nhất, bài viết này xác định những dấu vết hiện thực huyền ảo ở hệ thống nhân vật, không gian thời gian. Đồng thời, các khuynh hướng như kỳ ảo, siêu thực, hiện sinh cũng được làm rõ để nhận thấy sự phát triển trong tư tưởng cũng như thủ pháp nghệ thuật của Murakami. Các đối sánh với tiểu thuyết Hiện thực Huyền ảo Mỹ Latin và Việt Nam đương đại có tác dụng làm nổi rõ điểm tương đồng và khác biệt về huyền thoại văn hóa và mỹ học huyền ảo của Murakami.

Từ khóa: biến thái, chủ nghĩa Hiện thực Huyền ảo, tiểu thuyết Murakami Haruki, phân tích so sánh

1. Introduction

This research topic holds theoretical significance in clarifying the characteristics and nature of Magical Realism (MR). It also carries practical significance in determining the nature of the novels commonly regarded as Magical Realism by Murakami. Furthermore, it holds educational significance in terms of its potential inclusion in teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels of foreign literature programs. The subject of investigation in this article is Magical Realism, and the scope of the study encompasses five novels by Haruki Murakami, namely *Kafka on the Shore*

(KS), *After Dark (AD)*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle (TWUBC)*, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World (HBWEW)*, and *South of the Border, West of the Sun (SBWS)*.

Until now, when discussing MR, the majority of research has tended to focus on historical and cultural aspects, as seen in works such as *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, and *Magic (al) Realism* by Maggie Ann Bowers. However, these studies have not provided sufficient conditions to identify the origins and operating principles of the subject. This article applies additional methods such as structural analysis and legendary criticism (in *Golden Bough* by Frazer) to examine the essence of magic, its elements, and the dynamic and transformative tendencies of MR. Regarding Murakami's novels, alongside numerous affirmations of their MR nature, such as in *Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki* by Matthew C. Strecher and *Trauma, Pseudodementia, and Magical Realism in Haruki Murakami's A Shinagawa Monkey* by Suzanne LaLonde, there is still a tendency to define Murakami's novels as having elements of the fantastic and the surreal, regardless of the inherent differences between them. This article employs a historical and cultural approach to interpret and compare certain aspects between Murakami's novels and those from Latin America and Vietnam. The research model of this article can be summarized as follows:

Methods	Research Content	Research Hypothesis	New Research Findings
Legendary criticism	Magical Realism	Magic origin of Magical Realism	A fresh perspective
Structural analysis	Non-Magical Realism elements	Synthesis of heterogeneous elements	Development of Magical Realism
Cultural-historical analysis	Comparison of Murakami's novels	Differences in cultural perception	Post-modern tendencies

[**Figure 1.** Research Model of The Transformation of Magical Realism in Some Novels of Murakami Haruki]

2. Research Findings

2.1. *Magical Realism*

The core of MR lies in the element of the fantastic, which is inherent to life and has been extensively discussed by philosophers such as Lao Tzu and the Buddha. In the context of postcolonial Latin America, modern and postmodern writers, and thinkers transformed the fantastic into the quality of the magical/marvelous, creating an extraordinary reality (lo real maravilloso, as Carpentier coined it). According to Frazer's principles of magic (*The Golden Bough*), the magical element has a close relationship with magic, which involves the notions of resemblance and contact and their reciprocal influence. These principles also underlie the use of allegory and metaphor in art. In the magical sense, novels present rituals, incantations, and spellcasting systems, along with shamans, ritual objects, and ceremonies, as Herman Northrop Frye explained in *Anatomy of Criticism*. As an artistic element, the fantastic dominates a fresh,

holistic perspective that differs from the intense emotions of the imaginary. The concept of MR, from Novalis in *Das Allgemeine Brouillon* to Franz Roh and Alejo Carpentier, represents a journey from intellectual thought to artistic expression, encompassing characteristics related to the narrator and themes within the realm of postmodernism. It is a fusion of reality and the fantastic, distinct from modern fairy tales (e.g., *Harry Potter*) and fantasy stories (e.g., *A Christmas Carol*).

The Japanese variant of MR originates from the concept of Yugen (幽玄), which is prominently manifested in the spiritual power of the *The sound of the Mountain* (Kawabata Yasunari) and the ethereal yet tangible world of Murakami. MR Murakami's novels are primarily expressed in the character systems of individuals embarking on quests that blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, such as the protagonist "I" (Boku) in *HBWEW* or Kafka Tamura in *KS*. Ghostly figures represent the most solitary form of magical characters - the two soldiers (*KS*) combined with wondrous creatures like the black cat (yamikuro) and the one-horned, golden-haired beast. However, the most distinct elements of the fantastic can be found in the half-familiar, half-strange characters deeply rooted in ancestral customs, such as Lieutenant Sanders and Johnnie Walker. These characters immerse themselves in the ethereal realms of urban spaces (*AD*), forests (*KS*), or are influenced by fragmented, and non-linear time in the deep well (*TWUBC*) and unconscious time (*KS*). In short, the imaginary spaces and time in Murakami's novels possess an elusive, indistinct nature that is difficult to demarcate. This is why the author asserts in *Sputnik Sweetheart* that the magical words are "*perhaps*" and "*a certain period of time*" (Murakami, 2013, p.232).

2.2. The De-Magicalization of Murakami's Magical Realism

However, Murakami's novels are not strictly MR in the Latin American sense but rather heavily infused with the fantastic in the form of **ruptures between worlds**, which is a fundamental principle defining the elements of fantasy according to Todorov. Instead of a calm response, Murakami's characters react strongly: "*I was somewhat stunned to see the black spirits sculpting such exquisite phantoms in the thick darkness. And the fact that they could be seen in the dark did nothing to lessen my amazement at their handiwork*" (Murakami, 2010, p.309). Additionally, the modern nature and involvement of science and technology contribute to the pronounced element of the fantastic. As a result, the elements of fantasy are often explained through the characters' psychology: "*We go around back to the TV and find that the plug has been pulled. Well, actually, this TV should have stopped working*" (Murakami, 2007b, p. 38) (*After Dark*). The plot of the fantastic is also frequently employed by Murakami, particularly in the form of detective fiction elements (*TWUBC*, *HBWEW*). Especially notable is the narrative structure that starts with two separate storylines, which intersect, intertwine, and ultimately converge to simultaneously reveal and conclude the story, creating a sense of paired characters and fragmented identities within *HBWEW*, *AD*, etc. Furthermore, the repetitive system of details, such as the shadow in *KS*, *HBWEW*, is also present.

Murakami's novels also exhibit **elements of surrealism** in the layered structure of the world, which parallels the psychological structure of the characters. This is represented by the labyrinthine system of tunnels within the city, which serves as an expression of the

subconscious/unconscious: *"I function only as a tunnel leading to the unconscious. Everything happens solely through me"* (Murakami, 2010, p.159). Most of Murakami's novels unfold through the division from the external world to the characters' psychological consciousness. Each novel becomes a personal introspective adventure, a self-created world that flails and becomes trapped within itself. In this context, the characters confront the Oedipal complex, most notably in *KS*. The psychological framework of the characters is constructed with numerous fantastic elements, such as Toru Okada descending into the well of contemplation. They often exhibit signs of ambiguous confusion, an inability to grasp reality, and an attempt to differentiate between dreams and reality: *"I often dream that I am slowly emptying out, still alive, at the bottom of a well. Sometimes it feels as though that's what's really happening in reality, and that my present life is nothing more than a dream"* (Murakami, 2007c, p. 207). The characters undergo shifts in perspective, and the novels explore multiple viewpoints without finding definitive answers, due to their lack of collective voice: *"the lack of group identification is only one indication of the breakdown of traditional Japanese culture in the stories"* (Loughman, 1997, p.88). They are always lost in dreams - manifestations of an escape into the surreal. In *KS*, one can argue that everything is merely a dream. *TWUBC*, it is also suggested that the entire narrative is Toru's dream.

In addition, Murakami's novels are imbued with a strong **sense of existentialism**. All of Murakami's characters find themselves imprisoned in self-imposed confinement when they resolve to embark on a search only to fall into a vague and meaningless state: *"I saw the shadow of destruction and decay floating in the air. And my existence was trapped among all of those things. Like a shadow imprinted on a wall"* (Murakami, 2013, p. 111). The characters experience anxiety and unease as they strive to rediscover their true selves, but what they find is only torment and ambiguity. The story of *The Trial* by F. Kafka is evoked, highlighting the irrational nature of the court and the sinister demeanor of the gatekeeper of the law, as it faintly appears in *KS* and is veiled within *After Dark*. It symbolizes the hidden entity that both the characters and humanity seek: freedom. The price of freedom itself is the prison of one's own being, a consequence of the inflated ego and excessive indulgence in personal emotions. This is represented by Crow, an emotional alter ego of Kafka in *KS*, who constantly provokes, stimulates, and materializes the character's desires and passions. Living through emotions, Murakami's artistic world is filled with details that evoke intense sensations in the viewers, such as contrasting light, impactful gestures, and expressive speech, like the skinning alive scene in *TWUBC*. Like Jean-Paul Sartre, Murakami exhibits a duality, as he attempts to break free from the traditional past, and the dreams of Japan, in order to embrace Europe, the present, and happiness, but always lingering in the inner conflicts of his characters. Murakami refers to this state as the loss of soul and the past, a reaction to the blind immersion of the self in a chaotic world. The characters begin with psychological trauma (e.g., Toru in *TWUBC*). In *SBWS*, on the car, Shimamoto-san says to Hajime, *"When I look at you sideways like this while you're driving, I have this insane urge to grab the steering wheel and turn it hard. If I did that, the two of us would probably die"* (Murakami, 2013, p. 237). Murakami's characters also frequently experience bouts of nausea and sometimes contemplate suicide.

2.3. *Magical Realism in Murakami's Comparative Perspective*

Roman De La Campa identified that MR is "a practice that lacks any truly theoretical specificity, which is perhaps why it gets pulled into various literary domains" (1999, p. 216), in order to better understand the notable cultural, ideological, stylistic, and aesthetic transformations and innovations in Murakami's magical realism novels, Latin American MR (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) can serve as a useful reference. Firstly, in terms of cultural mythology, distinct from the indigenous and medieval European cultural foundations in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Murakami's novels exhibit a strong sense of globalism combined with Japanese culture, evident in lifestyles, dress, and especially in the introspective nature of Japanese thought when characters contemplate in wells and search for their true selves. If Marquez's focus is on the story of humanity, Murakami concentrates on individual stories, which are stories of loneliness and the labyrinth of Japanese youth closely intertwined with sexuality. Unlike the strong and naturalistic carnal aspect in Latin American literature, sexuality in Murakami's novels represents an effort to reach depth and philosophical exploration: "However, both of us are aware that we've had sex with each other. - What's that for? - To know, she said. - To know more, to know deeper" (Murakami, 2007c, p.256). From an aesthetic perspective, the fantastic elements in Murakami's works are characterized by their surreal and fantastical nature, constantly transforming and diversifying in a globalized direction. Therefore, while the fantastic element in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is poetic, in Murakami's works, the fantastic element is intertwined with everyday life, belonging to the mundane realm, and can be interpreted as a phenomenon of extreme weather: "A torrential downpour of leeches suddenly began, then let up and ceased altogether. Nakata closed his umbrella, brushed off the leeches clinging to his clothes, and returned to see how the man he'd hit was doing. A pile of writhing leeches surrounded and covered him, making it impossible for the old man to get any closer" (Murakami, 2007b, p. 215). The fantastic element in Murakami's works is often associated with melancholy, namely "aware," a sense of sadness inherent in the perception of a rich and fantastical life.

Modern Vietnamese Magical Realism and Murakami's Novels emerged during the same period, sharing similar contexts. The most significant similarity lies in the portrayal of elusive human figures; characters in Murakami's novels and modern Vietnamese MR are imbued with a sense of vagueness, uncertainty, loneliness, and wandering through life. Therefore, psychological trauma serves as a distinguishing characteristic of both the individuals and characters in Murakami's works, as well as in modern Vietnamese MR. This can be seen in Kafka (*KS*) haunted by his father's curse, Tinh in *Thoat ky thuy* and An in *Song* departing with heavy hearts when their lovers get married, transforming their lives into emptiness. Ghosts or spirits are the loneliest figures in MR novels, yet the difference lies in how ghosts in Murakami's works carry a sense of ethereal Postmodern ambiguity, while ghosts in modern Vietnamese MR are imbued with the moral essence of folklore and legend. With the profound influence of Buddhism, Murakami often allows his characters to experience meditation-like states, while Vietnamese novels open the doors of temples to embrace all the sufferings of life. In addition to the presence of ethereal characters, Murakami's novels and modern Vietnamese MR converge in their blending of the real and the

virtual within the same world. However, unlike Latin American MR, the ethereal nature of the artistic worlds in Vietnam and Japan undergo transformations, leaning towards interpretation and psychological rendering, approaching the realm of the fantastical. In Murakami's novels, the image of the library frequently appears. Kafka in *KS* seeks solace in the library, living and working there; the library becomes a symbol of power, a maze of timeless constraints that govern the movements, thoughts, and emotions of the characters. Influenced by the civilization of rivers and water, Vietnamese MR becomes an expansive space of endless rivers. It is the riverbank in *Manh dat lam nguoi nhieu ma* where Mrs. Son immerses herself, the stream in *Coi nguoi rung chuong tan the*, where Mai Trung's parents are harmed, and the mystical Di River that sweeps the forest into the sea. By sincerely and emotionally utilizing the fantastic element in his works, Murakami has contributed to the disintegration of the Postmodern aspect of this artistic element. From this perspective, it can be concluded that Vietnam does not have Postmodernism, just as Murakami is not strictly categorized as Magical Realism.

3. Conclusion

The article applies historical and cultural methods, structural analysis, and mythical criticism to examine Magical Realism (MR) in terms of its structure and narrative process, particularly in relation to Murakami's novels. It also compares this novelistic system with the works of Marquez and some representative contemporary Vietnamese authors. In terms of structure, MR is approached as a conceptual model of human perception and the world, with the fantastic element at its core. In terms of the narrative process, Murakami's novels are presented with three tendencies of de-magicalization, including the fantastic, surreal, and hyperreal. When observing Murakami's operation and transformation, this article asserts the absorption and transformation of MR in his novels, distinguishing it from adjacent forms such as modern fairy tales and the fantastical, from a cultural perspective. This topic can further be developed from the perspective of the laws of implied and allegorical fantastic operation to provide an interpretation from a cognitive or the perspective of examining Murakami's flexible fantastic works from the standpoint of Supermodernity.

❖ **Statement of Rights:** *The authors unequivocally affirm the absence of any conflicts regarding rights.*

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