

# A Study on Magical Realist Writing Techniques Used in *Men of Maize*

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**Abstract:** Miguel Ángel Asturias' work titled *Men of Maize* stands as a significant masterpiece within the realm of Latin American magical realism literature. It unfolds and discloses the profound and abiding antagonism that exists between Indian culture and modern capitalism by means of a prose narrative that is rendered in a poeticized fashion, replete with rich mythological symbols as well as complex social conflicts that are intricately interwoven. This paper undertakes an analysis across four distinct aspects, namely the backdrop or setting against which the work was created, the very definition along with the characteristic features that are emblematic of magical realism, the context or background within which it came into being and subsequently developed, and the specific and tangible manifestations of the magical realist writing techniques as they are exemplified in *Men of Maize*. The study that has been conducted reveals that *Men of Maize* manages to demonstrate the historical fissure or divide and the cultural antagonism that pervades Latin American society through the employment of techniques such as the clash of cultures, a non-traditional narrative structure that breaks away from the norm, and the symbolism associated with deities. Moreover, it simultaneously engages in a profound and incisive reflection upon the marginalization of traditional culture during the course of the modernization process. The creative output of Asturias is not solely a critique leveled at the social reality of Latin America; rather, it also represents an exploration of the common issues and challenges that are faced by mankind at large, thereby laying down an important and substantial foundation for the further development of magical realism literature.

**Keywords:** Magical realism; *Men of Maize*; Techniques of magical realist writing

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## 1. Introduction

*Men of Maize* is a classic work by Guatemalan author Miguel Ángel Asturias, first published in 1949. It is based on the unique social, historical, and cultural background of Latin America, and utilizes a magical realist approach to explore the conflict and integration between Indian culture and modern capitalism. At the beginning of his work, Asturias was deeply influenced by the class conflicts in Guatemalan society and the oppression of the Indians, and he incorporated myths, religions, and folklore into his work, thus constructing a world of art

that intertwines reality and fantasy. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the situation and the socio-cultural significance of the magical realism in *Men of Maize*, and to reveal the work's profound reflection on the history, culture, and social reality of Latin America. By exploring the techniques of culture clash, unconventional narrative structure, and deity symbolism, the paper further illustrates the important position of *Men of Maize* in the development of magical realism literature and the profound impact it has had on global literature.

## 2. Background of Men of Maize and its influence

Miguel Ángel Asturias is one of the most important founding fathers of Guatemalan literature, and his work *Hombres de Maíz* marks the early exploration and maturation of the magical realism genre in Latin American literature. Closely related to the history, social structure, and cultural complexity of the region, the novel is a detailed portrayal of the conflicts and contradictions of traditional Indians in the midst of the process of modernization. *Men of Maize* is not only Asturias' masterpiece, but is also recognized as a particularly important turning point in the development of magical realism.

In the course of his work, Asturias used poetic prose narrative techniques, rich and varied mythological symbols, and complex social conflicts, through which he clearly articulated his own profound critical attitude and in-depth reflection on Latin American society and culture <sup>[1]</sup>. The background material for Asturias' work is the class conflict in Guatemalan society and the deep antagonism between Indians and Latinos (Ladinos). During his childhood, Asturias experienced the poverty of Guatemala's indigenous society and witnessed the gradual decline of Indian culture, as well as the brutal reality of Indian subjugation and oppression. This special experience became an extremely important source for him to create the work *Men of Maize*. Through artistic processing, Asturias deeply explores the actual situation of inequality in the society after the end of colonization, especially focusing on the process of marginalization of the Indians in the emerging modern capitalist system.

## 3. Overview of magical realism

### 3.1. Definition and characteristics of magic realism

Magic realism focuses on integrating the real world with supernatural or strange elements to create a double feeling of "reality-illusion" that is hard to distinguish. Compared with traditional realism literature, magic realism is not only limited to the portrayal of external social reality, but it also uses myth, fantasy, and supernatural elements to realize a combination of the conventional presentation of reality, in order to show the deep symbolic meaning of the real world.

It began in Europe in the 1920s, flourished in Latin America between 1930 and 1950, and spread rapidly around the world between 1960 and 1970. The term first appeared in the context of German painting and art in December 1925, when the German art critic Franz Roh published the book *Magic Realism and Post-Expressionism: Some Problems of New Painting in Contemporary Europe*, in which the term Magic Realism was first given. Originally used to describe the "new trend" of paintings that took as their subject the economic downturn and the misery of the population in Germany after World War I, Franz Roh's article was translated into Spanish and published in 1927 in the internationally influential Spanish periodical *Revista Occidental*; In 1948, the Venezuelan writer Uslar Petri introduced the term to Latin American literature and began to use it systematically in Spanish-language American literary criticism. Magical realism is famous for its unique "magic" elements, which skillfully integrates the magical and unpredictable things into the portrayal of real life, breaking through the limitations set by traditional thinking, and presenting one after another marvelous

things that are beyond common sense and hard to say clearly. Magical realism has a unique narrative method that is not bound by time and space, skillfully blending reality and fantasy together, making readers feel as if they are in a world that is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. In this world, mystical, fantastical, and supernatural elements are intertwined with each other, bringing readers a reading experience they have never had before. Magical realism is not only a depiction of reality, but also a profound reflection on reality. By revealing the absurdity and irrationality of the real world, it prompts readers to think deeply about life, society, and human nature. The global spread of magic realism has also promoted the exchange and integration of different cultures. It enables writers and artists from all over the world to explore some common problems of human beings together, and enhances mutual understanding and respect among different cultures. Such cross-cultural exchanges have not only enriched the connotation of magic realism but also made it an indispensable part of global literature and art. It closely focuses on social reality and reveals the problems and contradictions in the real world by distorting and transcending reality. This kind of concern and reflection on reality makes magic realism have profound social significance and practical value.

In *Men of Maize*, Asturias skillfully integrates myths, religions, and folklore with the narrative content, thus creating a unique atmosphere in which it is difficult to distinguish the real from the imaginary, and one seems to be in the midst of a lost dream. The novel does not simply treat the magical elements as decorative details in the passages, but rather intertwines them closely with the real world, building an artistic world that encompasses both the real and the surreal. Such a fusion not only changes the traditional narrative structure but also creates a close and deep connection between the depiction of reality and the cultural perception of the Indians.

## **3.2. Background and development of magical realism**

### **3.2.1. Background**

Magic realism belongs to a unique literary genre that integrates daily life with fantasy and supernatural elements, thus presenting a literary style between reality and fantasy. The formation of magical realism is based on a complex and varied historical, cultural, and social background <sup>[2]</sup>.

The historical and social background of Latin America:

The rise of magical realism is closely related to the long history of colonization, social upheaval, and cultural mixing in Latin America. In Latin America, Spanish and Portuguese colonialism had a far-reaching impact, not only introducing European culture and religion but also colliding with the traditions, myths, and cultures of the indigenous peoples, and resulting in a fusion of cultures <sup>[3]</sup>. This clash of cultures is a social reality unique to Latin America, where many writers have used magic realism to express their personal views on social injustice, political violence, and social conflicts.

Influence of modernism:

At the beginning of the 20th century, modernist literature focused on breaking away from traditional narrative forms and exploring the relationship between the individual's inner world and social reality. The genre of magical realism was in fact influenced by modernist literature, specifically in its experiments with time, space, narrative structure, and language. Writers tend to distort reality in order to reveal the complexity of the human condition and the social context.

Influence of native folk culture and religion:

The people of Latin America are largely influenced by folklore, religious beliefs, and myths, and these traditions play an important role in the formation of magical realism. Writers integrated those myths and religious rituals with their daily lives, thus creating a realist literary style with mystical colors.

### 3.2.2. Development

1940s: Early exploration and influence:

Magical realism is a distinctive literary style that first emerged in Latin American literature in the 1940s. Early writers like Julio Cortázar of Argentina and García Márquez of Colombia set out to combine elements of the everyday with the fantastic. Cortázar's short story *The Jumping Place* and Marquez's *The Devil and the Lady* are two examples of the genre's beginnings.

1960s: "The explosion of Latin American literature":

In the 1960s, magical realism flourished in Latin America and was called the "explosion of Latin American literature." It was during this period that many writers began the process of writing a large number of novels characterized by magical realism, which gained widespread attention around the world. One of the most well-known masterpieces is Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, published in 1967, which has become a representative work of magical realism and has had a profound impact on the global literary world. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* intertwines Latin American history, culture, politics, and fantasy to bring out a series of themes such as family destiny, political violence, and social change.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the maturation and globalization of magical realism:

After the success of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, magical realism became globalized, and the influence of the writers began to spread around the world. Writers continued to explore how to combine the everyday with the fantastic, seeking to show human emotions and social conflicts in a more subtle and diverse way. Writers such as Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes have also begun to devote themselves to the creation of magical realism, which, to a large extent, has pushed this literary genre towards maturity.

From the 1990s to the present, the influence and re-creation of magic realism:

Since the 1990s, although magic realism no longer occupies the position of the mainstream literary genre, its influence is still quite far-reaching. Many modern writers have incorporated many elements of magical realism into their works, resulting in a unique style known as "post-magical realism." Take the Chilean author Isabel Allende's *The House of Ghosts*, which utilizes the narrative techniques of magic realism with additional feminist elements. In addition to this, magic realism has also been used in cinema, for example, in the movie *Pan's Labyrinth* directed by Guillermo del Toro.

## 4. Embodiment of magical realist writing techniques in the work

### 4.1. The lost paradise: Clash of cultures and integration

One of the key central themes of *The Cornhuskers* is the clash of cultures and the state of integration<sup>[4]</sup>. Through the detailed description of the relationship between Indians and Latinos, the novel brings out the deep and obvious opposition between two different civilizations and two different ways of life. On the one hand, the Indians have always adhered to the traditional civilization based on the land and nature, which is an important symbol of survival and culture, and has been deeply integrated into the life of the Indians as well as their belief system. On the other hand, Latinos (especially Ladinos) represent a modern civilization based on commodification and capitalism, which is characterized by exploitation, coercion, and consumption. In Asturias' work, the threat of modernization to the traditional way of life is well represented by the encroachment of the Ladino on the lives of the Indians. In this novel, Asturias depicts this cultural conflict through the use of magical realism and contrasts the deep-rooted values of the Indians with those of the capitalist society through the presentation of Indian myths, religions, and cultures. Through magical events and characters, such as the mythologizing of Gaspar Irón, he expresses his views on the destruction of indigenous traditions by

modernization and his defense of traditional culture.

## **4.2. Dislocated time and space: Non-traditional narrative structure**

*Men of Maize* employs an unconventional narrative structure in which time and space are dislocated, and the traditional linear narrative pattern is broken. There are many storylines in the novel, which are intertwined and intermixed in time and space, and Asturias creates a chaotic and surreal atmosphere with this narrative technique, which makes the boundary between reality and fantasy ambiguous. This dislocation of time and space strengthens the mystery of the novel on the one hand, and adds to its fantasy color on the other, while reinforcing the metaphorical effect on the split situation of the real society as well as the rupture of history. By adopting such a narrative style, Asturias not only breaks the traditional structure of literature in terms of form but also reveals the profound cultural and historical conflicts in Latin American societies in terms of content. In the work *Men of Maize*, Asturias lets readers truly experience a non-linear and irrational flow of time, and the intertwining of history and reality more realistically reveals the chaos and uncertainty of Latin American society<sup>[5]</sup>.

## **4.3. Ubiquitous deities: Intertwining virtual and reality**

The gods and supernatural forces in *Men of Maize* belong to a very prominent category of magical realism. The myths and religious beliefs in this novel do not exist only as background elements, but are closely related to the destiny of the characters and the change of society. Asturias creates a world in which the virtual and the real are intertwined through the use of mythological deities, witchcraft, and traditional Indian beliefs. In this novel, the gods are not only supernatural beings, but their actions and events have an impact on the real world and directly shape the destinies of the characters<sup>[6]</sup>. In Asturias' creative activity, the gods symbolize a force against the oppression of modernity. Through the use of myth and religion, Asturias illustrates how the Indians, in the face of modernization and colonialism, relied on their beliefs and traditions to maintain their identity and vitality.

## **4.4. The doomed ending: Hints and symbols**

The ending of *Men of Maize* is full of allusions and symbols that bring out the unresolved situation of cultural and historical conflict<sup>[7]</sup>. The novel does not dispose of the conflict with a simple ending, but uses symbolism to reveal the deep-seated historical cycles and cultural regeneration of Latin American societies. At the end of the novel, the conflict between traditional culture and modernization is not really resolved, but is instead embodied by means of magic and myth. This ending is on the one hand a cry in defense of traditional culture, and on the other hand a deep reflection on the injustice of modern society and the many problems left over by history<sup>[8]</sup>.

## **4.5. Visual illusion**

In *Men of Maize*, Asturias uses the technique of optical illusion to interweave reality with fantasy. With this technique, many of the scenes in the novel have an ambiguous and irrational atmosphere, which allows the reader to experience the feeling of being in a "virtual reality." This technique intensifies the magic of the work and reinforces the symbolic effect of the work in presenting the rifts and cultural oppositions that exist in the history of Latin American societies.

### **4.5.1. Multiple symbols**

Asturias uses the element of corn as an extremely important symbol in his novels. It is important to know that corn is a symbol of life and culture in the Mayan culture, and it also embodies the close relationship between human beings and nature. He blended the corn with people, events, and the natural environment, thus creating

a symbolism that is multilayered. Corn exists as a kind of food, and it carries not only the survival needs of the Maya people, but also represents the spiritual and cultural roots of the Maya people. In the novel, corn is often closely associated with traditional Mayan religious ceremonies and seasonal changes, which further strengthens the symbolism of corn.

Asturias also uses the depiction of nature, such as mountains, forests, and rivers, to intertwine them with mythological deities and creatures, so that the line between reality and myth becomes blurred. This fusion of nature and myth on the one hand allows the reader to experience a sense of beauty with unreal colors, and on the other hand makes the world in which the story is set full of mysterious and surreal atmosphere.

#### **4.5.2. Perspective shift**

Asturias uses multi-perspective narrative means, in which each perspective presents the unique personal experience and cognitive status of different characters, and these perspectives often have their own prejudices and limitations. Such a multi-perspective narrative can prompt readers to search for the truth in different perspectives, and the different narrative styles of each character will make readers create some kind of cognitive illusion. In such a process, Asturias intentionally blurs the so-called “real” face of the story, breaking the boundaries of the traditional single narrative perspective, and turning each character’s perspective into a kind of “partial truth.” This makes each character’s perspective a “local truth,” and ultimately makes the whole story full of complexity and a certain sense of depth.

Asturias also skillfully utilizes the technique of unreliable narrators. Some of the narrators are influenced by their personal experiences and emotions in their descriptions. It is this unreliability that makes the reader more skeptical about the authenticity of the story, allowing them to feel the distortions and illusions of the story as their perceptions continue to shift.

#### **4.5.3. Time dislocation**

The narrative time in *Men of Maize* is not linear, it mainly uses flashbacks and pre-narrative techniques to make the story jump back and forth between different points in time<sup>[9]</sup>. By virtue of such a non-linear narrative, Asturias successfully breaks the traditional chronological structure, which in turn allows the reader to feel the illusion of time and the sense of chaos brought about by the chaotic time jumps. In this way, the structure of the story becomes more and more complex, and also increases the challenge to the traditional narrative time, so that when the reader goes to understand the story line, it will inevitably produce a lot of difficulties and confusion, as if the time and space itself has been twisted and distorted in general.

Asturias employs a cyclical narrative technique in his book, in which parts of the plot and themes are repeated in different chapters, forming a cyclical structure. This structure allows readers to experience the repetition of time and the sense of endlessness, as if everything is constantly cycling back and forth, and this illusion makes the story look more and more mysterious, and at the same time, it also carries a kind of feeling that is difficult for people to escape.

#### **4.5.4. Mental illusion**

Asturias intertwines dreams with reality, which makes the reader blur the line between the two. In *Men of Maize*, dreams and illusions are depicted throughout the work. There are many episodes and experiences of the characters that make it difficult for the reader to distinguish between what is real and what is unreal. With this technique, Asturias enhances the mystery of the story and sets the characters and plots of the story in a surreal

atmosphere, presenting a state of realism and ambiguity at the same time.

The language and descriptions in the novels often continue to give psychological hints to the readers. For example, Asturias' detailed depiction of Mayan life evokes in the reader a sense of longing for traditional culture and a sense of respect. In particular, his poetic expression of natural scenery and Mayan traditions allows the reader to experience an emotional belonging, and then to reach a cultural level of identity, and ultimately creates a specific psychological illusion that makes people believe that this traditional way of life is actually the idealized one.

#### 4.5.5. Language play

In *Men of Maize* <sup>[10]</sup>, Asturias skillfully uses language that is paradoxical and contradictory in nature, so that the reader is prompted to think about the story as he or she understands it. For example, the description of the conflict between modern civilization and traditional Mayan culture reveals the contradictions and paradoxes between the two. With his paradoxical language, Asturias allows the reader to deeply feel the eroding effects of modernization and the painful struggle of traditional culture, which in fact reflects the profound conflict in Latin American societies.

Asturias' skillful use of repetition and variation creates an illusion of familiarity and unfamiliarity for the reader. There are words or phrases that are repeated in different contexts, and each repetition has subtle variations. Such repetitions and variations are particularly prominent in the description of Mayan rituals and traditional practices, enabling the reader to truly feel the disruption of time and space in the successive echoes.

#### 4.5.6. Cross-sensory depiction

In his novels, Asturias uses the fusion of the senses to create a new perceptual experience, prompting the reader to create a cross-sensory illusion. For example, he uses the expression "warm sound" to portray the auditory experience, or "sweet smile" to depict the visual experience. Such a fusion of senses makes the reader's perception no longer limited to a single sense, but rather, through the intertwining of multiple senses, the reader is able to truly feel the richness and layering of every detail in the story.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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