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Navigating Identity and Belonging Through Magical Realism: A Comparative Study of Cristina García and Ben Okri

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Abstract:
This study explores the intersection of magical realism and transnational feminism in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, examining how both authors employ magical realism to navigate the complex themes of identity, belonging, migration, colonialism, and gender. Hegemonic ideologies and conventional historical narratives are subverted by magical realism, a storytelling technique defined by the seamless blending of the magical with the real. *Dreaming in Cuban* is a critique of patriarchal control over female bodies and dogmatic nationalism by García, who employs magical realism themes such as telepathy, embodied trauma, and non-linear time to depict the fractured identities of a Cuban diasporic family across generations. In *The Famished Road*, another work by Okri portrays post-colonial Nigeria, the protagonist, Azaro, grapples with tensions between myth and modernity, tradition and change, drawing on Yoruba cosmology and spirit-world imagery. Using cyclical time, spiritual visions, and mythopoeic storytelling, Okri reimagined cultural memory while criticising neocolonial corruption. These works demonstrate how magical realism challenges the rigid notions of who we are and where we belong by offering alternative, hybrid frameworks informed by international experiences. Transnational feminist theory provides a framework for investigation, emphasising decolonisation, cultural hybridity, and intersectionality. This cross-cultural analysis illustrates how magical realism offers underrepresented groups a platform to challenge repressive systems and present alternative viewpoints.

Keywords: Magical realism, Transnational feminism, Identity, Belonging, Migration, Colonialism, Gender, Embodied trauma, Spirit world, Intersectionality, Cultural hybridity, Decolonisation.

Introduction

In the works of Cristina García and Ben Okri, magical realism serves as a potent storytelling technique for expressing complex identities shaped by gender, migration, and colonialism. Both writers explored the international context of identity flux and employed magical realism to challenge rigid ideological boundaries. García illustrates the disjointed identities of individuals dealing with political turmoil and exile in Dreaming in Cuban by employing magical realism techniques, such as telepathic contact and literalised metaphors (García 29). To mirror the post-colonial Nigerian contradictions between tradition

and modernity, Okri incorporated Yoruba cosmology and spiritual visions into *The Famished Road* (Okri 4). These texts demonstrate how magical realism can be employed to challenge established notions of identity and belonging by presenting diverse, fractured, and embodied stories that reflect the experiences of individuals who transcend borders.

Post-colonial literature relies heavily on magical realism, which promotes decolonisation and undermines dominant historical narratives through the coexistence of the real and magical (Faris 7). Magical realism, as noted by Wendy B. Faris, introduces an "irreducible element of magic" while maintaining a robust phenomenal world, which leads to disturbing uncertainties about reality and time (Faris 7). Authors such as García and Okri are able to challenge dominant ideas and reinterpret historical events through the lenses of marginalised groups because of this dualism. To illustrate the psychological effects of political violence and relocation, García used magical realism to depict Lourdes' painful memories of life (Mrak 186). Similarly, Okri highlights the recursive character of history and the enduring power of cultural memory by symbolising communal pain and the defiance of colonial tyranny via the spirit realm (Reeds 105).

By opposing universalising discourses on women's experiences and emphasising intersectional analyses of gender, race, class, and country, transnational feminism enhances magical realism (Mohanty 22). Instead of viewing "Third World women" through a Western feminist lens of helplessness and victimhood, Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that we need context-specific interpretations that account for the variety and agency of these women (Mohanty 22). The female protagonists in *Dreaming in Cuban*, such as Celia, Lourdes, and Pilar, employ magical realism to overcome political and patriarchal obstacles and speak out against a male-dominated culture (Tate 145). Similarly, the intricate gendered power relations among post-colonial societies are mirrored in Okri's portrayal of Madame Koto and other female characters (Shohat 15). Together, magical realism and transnational feminism provide a platform to underrepresent women's views, which in turn fights stereotyping and promotes acceptance of diversity.

Both works centre on post-colonial belonging and identity; magical realism allows for investigations of hybridity, diaspora, and the "third space" (Bhabha 54). Cultural identities are negotiated and remade in the third space, according to Homi Bhabha's conceptualisation (Bhabha 54), which challenges narratives of national identity that homogenise. Through her psychic relationship with her grandmother and her dreams in Spanish, Pilar's hyphenated identity as a Cuban-American is demonstrated in *Dreaming in Cuban*, demonstrating the flexibility of cultural belonging (McAuliffe 6). On the other hand, Okri argues that Azaro's liminal state in *The Famished Road*, between the human and supernatural realms, is emblematic of post-colonial identity's ambivalence towards both modernity and tradition (p. 4). The complexity of cross-cultural life is therefore shown via magical realism's examination of the ways in which memory, trauma, and identity formation are intertwined.

Cristina García's magical realist literary style, which incorporates personal and political history, is profoundly influenced by her own experiences of exile and diaspora (Mrak 180). Garcia, who was born in Cuba but grew up in the US, investigates how migration affects people emotionally and psychologically, both as individuals and as families. Three generations of the del Pino family are followed in her book *Dreaming in Cuban*, which was influenced by the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath (Garcia 1). García emphasises the conflict between reminiscence and reality by using magical realism techniques and non-linear narratives to portray the displacement and yearning felt by exiles. The disjointed form of the book reflects an individual's identity, which in turn reflects the insecurity of belonging globally (Saez 131).

Ben Okri critiques colonialism and neocolonialism through the lens of magical realism, a literary style heavily influenced by his Nigerian heritage and his experiences growing up during the Nigerian Civil War

(Shanmugapriya 437). Okri weaves together myth and reality in a story that draws on Yoruba cosmology and oral traditions to depict the conflict an abiku child faces as they are torn between the human and supernatural realms (Okri 4). In addition to reflecting on the political and social upheaval in Nigeria in the years following independence, his book The Famished Road challenges Western epistemologies by giving greater weight to traditional indigenous ways of knowing. As Reed points out, the protagonist Azaro's experiences with ghosts and visions symbolise the resiliency and collective memory of oppressed populations, showing how colonialism continues to shape modern notions of self. (Reeds 105)

In the writings of Cristina García and Ben Okri, magical realism has emerged as a pivotal storytelling technique for exploring the intersection of gender, migration, and colonialism. Both writers offer new perspectives on the complexities of transnational subjectivity by challenging static notions of who we are and where we belong. The significance of cultural hybridity, memory, and resistance in shaping individual and community identities is highlighted by their use of magical realism. Drawing on comparative research inspired by post-colonial studies and transnational feminist theory, this study demonstrates how magical realism can be a powerful tool for expressing diverse and lived experiences of identity in a globalised society.

Comparative Analysis of Magical Realism in the Texts

Dreaming in Cuban by Cristina García and *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri employ magical realism as a powerful storytelling technique, enabling writers to explore complex issues of spirituality, displacement, memory, and identity. *Dreaming in Cuban* is a work of magical realism by García, which portrays the disjointed identities of Celia, Lourdes, and Pilar, three generations of the del Pino family, as they negotiate their place in the world between Cuba and the US. Exploration of individual and communal memory is made possible by the novel's non-linear structure, which mirrors the displacement felt by immigrants and exiles (Mrak 180). One example is the telepathic connection that exists between Pilar and her grandmother, Celia, which represents the unbreakable emotional bond that transcends political and geographical barriers (Garcia 29). The novel's setting portrays this supernatural link as commonplace, rather than remarkable; this is in keeping with Wendy B. Faris's description of magical realism as a style in which “the magical is accepted as part of reality” (Faris 7).

Trauma, especially as it pertains to gendered abuse and the domination of female bodies, is another major issue in *Dreaming in Cuban*. One characteristic of magical realism is the physical manifestation of suffering via literalised metaphors. In the case of Lourdes, who had a miscarriage and was raped by a revolutionary soldier during the Cuban Revolution, this is the case. She still feels the scraping blade on her stomach and can smell the attacker's hair years after the fact, proving that trauma from the past may linger into the present (Garcia 196). “The power such constructions have over human thought and human action, and the very real suffering they can inflict” (Mrak 187), according to Anja Mrak, who argues that magical realist methods do just that. In the aftermath of Cuba's revolution, these physical manifestations of trauma act as a defence mechanism against the marginalisation of women's stories.

In a similar vein, Ben Okri delves into the cultural and spiritual aspects of Nigerian society, specifically as they pertain to Yoruba cosmology in The Famished Road, employing magical realism as an approach. Okri argues that the protagonist, Azaro, embodies the post-colonial Nigerian conflict between tradition and modernity through his journey as an abiku, a spirit child imprisoned between life and death. In a story where the legendary and the real cohabit, the lines between the past and the present become porous as a result of his encounters with the dead and his vision. For instance, the prophetic visions of a mechanised

future that Azaro experiences, or the voices that discuss Nigeria's loss of independence, are representations of the country's sociopolitical battles (Okri 196). “Okri uses the Yoruba tradition in *The Famished Road* to exemplify their rich heritage and culture” (Shanmugapriya 437), which is supported by Shanmugapriya's observation, further bolstering the novel's criticism of neocolonial corruption and the loss of indigenous values.

Both books use magical realism to question nationalist and ideological dogmatism. Pilar exemplifies a more malleable and complex identity, in contrast to Celia and Lourdes, who stand as opposites in Dreaming in Cuban—one totally devoted to the Cuban Revolution and the other totally rejecting it. Her proficiency in both Spanish and Cuban roots exemplifies a transnational subjectivity that defies easy classification (Garcia 235). In *The Famished Road*, Azaro's fight for human existence against the allure of the supernatural reflects Nigeria's internal conflict between its desire for independence and its history of colonisation (Okri 4). The book critiques post-independence political corruption and the resulting erosion of a genuine national identity.

At its core, magical realism serves to subvert realistic assumptions and linear storylines in both works while also giving voice to historically and culturally marginalised groups. García and Okri offered new perspectives on history and self-understanding in a world where memory, myth, and lived experience intersect, rethinking identity and belonging beyond the limitations of nationhood.

Thematic Comparison: Identity and Belonging

In Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, magical realism explores fluid and fixed identities, gendered power relations, memory and trauma, and negotiation of national and diasporic belonging. Pilar, in García's work, exemplifies a multifaceted character that defies strict classification; however, her mother, Lourdes, and grandmother, Celia, represent contrasting ideological poles—Cuban socialism and American capitalism, respectively (García 26). Transnational subjectivity enables Pilar to move freely between cultures without fully embracing any one of them, as evidenced by her mental connection to her grandmother and her ability to dream in Spanish (Mrak, 187). On the other hand, Lourdes uses her idealised American identity to escape her violent and exile-instigating history in Cuba (Garcia 196). Just as Celia's unfaltering commitment to the Cuban Revolution prevents her from reconciling with her estranged daughter, so too does it reinforce a rigid identity based on political philosophy rather than interpersonal connections (Mrak 180). This difference emphasises the ways in which magical realism allows García to question ideological inflexibility and emphasise the intricacies of cultural hybridity.

As an abiku kid, Azaro represents the post-colonial predicament in *The Famished Road*, torn between the human and spiritual realms, and between the old and the new (Okri 4). His fight for survival reflects social and political conflicts in modern-day Nigeria, a country whose colonial legacies have left an indelible mark. Azaro, like Pilar, lives in a liminal place where different viewpoints may coexist; however, in contrast to Pilar, he continues to challenge his agency with social and supernatural forces that are beyond his control. He demonstrates that history is not linear, but cyclical and deeply ingrained in cultural awareness through his visions and interactions with spirits, which reflect the communal pain of colonialism and civil upheaval (Shanmugapriya 437). Both books offer new perspectives on how people construct their identities in the face of persecution and exile by blurring the lines between fact and fiction.

Both works focus on gender and power, especially as they pertain to the depiction and agency of women. Through storytelling, reminiscence, and magical realism, the women of *Dreaming in Cuban* fight political

and patriarchal tyranny. A characteristic of magical realism, Lourdes' pain takes physical form via literalised metaphors, showing how the psychological and physiological effects of gendered abuse are long-lasting (Garcia 196). As Anja Mrak points out, such gadgets highlight "the power such constructions have over human thought and human action, and the very real suffering they can inflict" (Mrak 187). Despite her ideological inflexibility, Celia can make a difference through her leadership in the community and her connection with her daughter, which is far from perfect. By embracing her mixed origins and rejecting the binary concept of identity, Pilar expresses her individuality (McAuliffe 6).

Spiritual leaders, victims, and changemakers were all women on *The Famished Road*. For example, Madame Koto's bar and prophetic powers provide her authority as a gatekeeper between the material and ethereal worlds (Okri 134). The duality of women's autonomy in post-colonial nations is reflected in her portrayal as both cunning and opportunistic. Women, like Azaro's mother, show both weakness and strength as they persevere through adversity. By including them, you draw attention to the ways in which magical realism lends a voice to the voiceless, demonstrating how gender, spirituality, and resistance intersect.

Both tales deal with memory and trauma in some way, and magical realism helps reframe difficult pasts. *Dreaming in Cuban* questions the idea that pain fades with time, as Lourdes' horrific memories come to life via magical realism. Trauma persists throughout generations, as her recurrent perceptions of the rapist's fragrance and blade show (Garcia, 196). Similar to how Pilar's mental link with Celia transcends physical and emotional boundaries, Tate argues that family memory functions independently of the temporal and spatial frameworks. (153) As Azaro sees the aftereffects of past injustice in his vision, the collective anguish of colonialism and civil conflict is brought to light in *The Famished Road*. In *The Famished Road*, "Okri uses the Yoruba tradition to exemplify their rich heritage and culture" (Shanmugapriya 437), which Shanmugapriya notes highlights how magical realism helps heal by reconstructing history via indigenous frameworks.

Within diasporic settings, both books examine the conflicts between imagined communities and broken identities. The nationalist ideologies that García opposes provide a paradigm of belonging that celebrates plurality, rather than reducing identity to solitary attachments. As an example of how diasporic subjects navigate cultural displacement and competing allegiances, Pilar's hyphenated identity as a Cuban-American challenges the essentialist notion of nationhood (Saez 131). Characters are able to transcend geographical boundaries and revive ancestral traditions through the use of magical realism, which reimagines the concept of home and homeland. Okri presents Nigeria in *The Famished Road* as a place where multiple narratives, influenced by colonialism, corruption, and resistance, coexist, calling into question established national identities. In a nation divided between tradition and modernity, Azaro's quest mirrors the larger fight for independence.

By extending the reach of magical realism beyond Latin America and proving its relevance in global settings, these tales make a substantial contribution to transnational feminist writing. García and Okri promote decolonial storytelling and challenge Eurocentric literary traditions by emphasising female experiences and integrating other ways of knowing. Their writings harness the potential of magical realism as a tool for social criticism and cultural change, addressing pressing themes such as migrant crises, identity politics, and the ongoing struggle against structural oppression.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the issues of identity, belonging, gender, memory, and post-colonial experience are explored in both *"Dreaming in Cuban" by Cristina García and "The Famished Road"* by Ben Okri through the use of magical realism, a potent storytelling device. These writers offer fluid, hybrid constructions of national and cultural identity that reflect the complexities of transnational living by blending the real with the mystical, thereby challenging rigid notions of such identities. The intergenerational experiences of Celia, Lourdes, and Pilar—who suffer political exile, trauma, and diaspora—help García depict identity as complex and divided. In cases of ideological inflexibility and gendered violence, magical realism provides a safe space for the release of repressed feelings and experiences. Similarly, Okri portrays Azaro, the abiku kid, as a symbol of post-colonial Nigeria's conflict between tradition and modernity, drawing on Yoruba's cosmology and images of the spirit realm to condemn colonialism and neocolonial corruption. Using magical realism, the authors of both works reinvent what it means to belong to a global community and challenge the conventional historical narratives. By providing a platform for under-represented groups and challenging conventional wisdom, their writings have made substantial contributions to feminist and post-colonial theories on a global scale. Ultimately, García and Okri demonstrate that magical realism is not confined to a specific location; rather, it is a global literary movement that challenges dominance and fosters mutual understanding across cultures in our increasingly interconnected world.

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