

When Real People Happen To Imaginary Things

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Explore the ways in which writers have used the techniques of magic realism to address issues in the real world.

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What kind of realism is it when people float up into the sky, or fall from it without hurting themselves, or turn into strange beasts? It sounds less like realism than fantasy, something from *The Arabian Nights* or a computer game. But it would be wholly misleading to describe as fantasy such works as *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, or *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass, or *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. And yet such strange events and transformations take place in these books, often described as 'magic realist' novels.

— from *Word Power* by Julian Birkett [Birkett 1993, pp.96-7]

The terms 'magic' and 'realism' do not, at first, appear to sit comfortably side by side. If we take 'realism' to mean writing that, as Julian Birkett suggests in his book *Word Power*, 'mirrors the surface of everyday life' [Birkett 1993, p.89] then magic hardly seems to belong in realistic writing. But then, 'there are different kinds of everyday life, and there are different kinds of mirror' [Birkett 1993, p.89].

The 'real world' reflected in the mirror of Western science does not allow for magic (as one of the characters in Neil Gaiman's *The Books of Magic* says, 'Science is a way of talking about the universe in words that bind it to a common reality. Magic is a method of talking to the universe in words it cannot ignore. The two are rarely compatible.' [BoM, 1]). Western newspapers address issues of money, politics, crime and scandal, but generally speaking do not carry stories of (say) a man who is transformed into a half-goat, half-human monster, or a girl into whom the shame of a nation is poured. But let's examine some different mirrors.

In Henry James' story *The Turn of the Screw* it is not clear to the reader whether or not the ghosts are in fact real. But they do appear real to the governess: her belief in them and their malicious aims is the driving force behind most of her actions.

The crucial words here: *her belief*. *The Turn of the Screw* gives us a highly subjective description of a series of events, a description that is arguably not 'realistic' in the same way as, say, a Thomas Hardy novel—but nevertheless, a description that creates *a reality*, the *governess's* reality.

In Gabriel García Márquez' novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 'a sense of the marvellous runs deep in the village imagination ... Márquez' magic realism draws on the tradition of village storytelling to tell the story of the village itself, but uses the sophisticated realist style of the modern novel in the process' [Birkett 1993, p.98]. Márquez' novel is the story of Macondo from the villagers' point of view (in fact largely from the point of view of the members of one family); he does not call into question their 'fantastic' beliefs, and the result is a far deeper empathy with the characters than would be achieved by describing the story of the village in an objective, documentary style. By giving the reader this empathic connection with the village, Márquez creates a world that is far more personal to the reader—and hence, more believable, more realistic—than any documentary.

Magic, then—which in this context means the use of magical or fantastic elements in a narrative—is capable, in certain circumstances, of making a story more, not less, realistic. As Julian Birkett writes in *Word Power*: 'People remember the magic things because they're more unusual, but they take place in a world which is extremely real in the everyday sense. It's the curious relationship between the two, the describing of the extraordinary as if it were the ordinary, that gives magic realism its unique effect. The Nazi Germany of *The Tin Drum*, observed by a small boy who never grows up, or the India of *Midnight's Children*, are powerfully real places, shaped by politics and money and ideology.' [Birkett 1993, p.98]

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So far we have rather skirted around the main issue of this essay, but with good reason. The use of magic realist techniques to explore characters' inner

worlds is an important one, to which we shall return: we shall see how the use of these techniques allows writers to give voice to concerns and issues in the real world—issues in some cases that could be difficult to address otherwise, at least not without sacrificing a level of personal involvement on the part of the reader.

The brief excursion over: *Explore the ways in which writers have used the techniques of magic realism to address issues in the real world.*

A first, important point to make is that we shall employ a wide, open-minded definition of ‘magic realism’ in this essay. The reader will note that we have already mentioned one work, Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, which is not commonly thought of as belonging to the ‘magic realist’ pantheon. Nevertheless, this work includes a seemingly magical element—the ghosts—that is arguably no less believable than some of the things Saleem, the narrator of *Midnight’s Children*, claims to have happened¹. And while James uses this plot to explore human psychology and perceptions of reality rather than explicit ‘real world’ issues such as politics or social change, it is still arguably a ‘magic realist’ technique. By entering into the governess’s world, where the ghosts are real, we are able to explore reality in a different way.

Similarly, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*—another ‘non-pantheon’ novel—can be described as using the techniques of magic realism. Magic—Orlando’s near ageless journey from Elizabethan times to the 1920s, and the change of sex that occurs along the way—is set against a highly detailed description of real-world history. The magical aspects allow Woolf to explore issues of gender in a highly original manner.

Orlando will be examined in some detail alongside a more recent novel that covers similar territory: Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*. We will investigate how the magical aspects of these stories allow writers to address gender issues in new and surprising ways, and through new viewpoints.

We will also investigate the uses of magic realism in exploring history and politics. Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* has already been mentioned; alongside this we will discuss *The Satanic Verses*. We will demonstrate the ways in which Rushdie uses magic realism to take issue with the ‘official’ histories of India and Pakistan, to explore the many faces of India that do not appear in the history books; to satirise the manner in which politicians

1 We shall address the issue of Saleem’s (un)reliability as a narrator later in the essay. Witness, though, the dismissive reference to him in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* [MLS, p.342]. Within his own world, Saleem is central to the history of India; given a different person’s viewpoint, this seems not to be the case...

in India, Pakistan and Britain have exploited and oppressed their peoples through religion and racism; to question notions of 'belonging' and the issue of what it means to be an 'immigrant'.

We will begin our investigation, however, by addressing the issues raised by the 'landmark novel of magic realism' [Birkett 1993, p.98], a novel we have already mentioned on a number of occasions: Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

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'There must have been thousands of them,' he murmured.

'What?'

'The dead,' he clarified. 'It must have been all the people who were at the station.'

The woman measured him with a pitying look. 'There haven't been any dead here,' she said. 'Since the time of your uncle, the colonel, nothing has happened in Macondo.'

— from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez

[HYS, pp.313-14]

One Hundred Years of Solitude is a rich, many-layered book, a family saga that is both epic and at the same time intimate. The latter springs from Márquez' intensely personal relationship with his characters: the novel is written in the third person, but as Márquez' narration shifts from one character to another, so it takes on a unique empathy with that character's world view. We are shown events as each character sees them, and while the truth of this point of view is sometimes questioned by other characters in the novel, the narrative refuses to comment.

It is this unquestioning narrative that lets us see many of the fantastic events that occur in Macondo. For example, when Remedios the Beauty floats away into the sky we are told: 'The outsiders, of course, thought that Remedios the Beauty had finally succumbed to her irrevocable fate of a queen bee and that her family was trying to save her honour with that tale of levitation' [HYS, p.243]. The tone of this statement, suggesting as it does that this is no more than the snide suggestion of a few cynics, leaves the reader with little option but to accept the miracle.

The narrative has a darker side, though. When José Arcadio Segundo witnesses the slaughter of thousands of striking workers from the banana plantations, the scene is described in vivid, graphic terms, as is the moment when he wakes up on the train of corpses [HYS, pp.309-12]. Yet when he returns to Macondo he is greeted with a flat denial of his version of events. The people he speaks to either do not know, or are too frightened to admit to knowing, about the events he describes. Official proclamations state that the strike was peacefully and cordially resolved. The military authorities deny all knowledge of atrocities: 'Nothing has happened in Macondo ... This is a happy town.' [HYS, p.316] The official version of events, 'repeated a thousand times over and mangled out all over the country by every means of communication' [HYS, p. 315] is 'finally accepted: there were no dead, the satisfied workers had gone back to their families' [HYS, p.315]. The degree of control the authorities are able to exert over the truth is frightening and unnatural—in context, much more unnatural than the 'magical' ascension of Remedios the Beauty.

Indeed, the authorities have an almost supernatural feel of malign omnipotence about them. Not only can they make three thousand corpses vanish without a trace (not just physically: their fate is written out of history itself), they can impose a self-evidently false 'truth' on their people and convince them to believe it. Having announced a settlement with the workers, it is stated that work at the plantation will recommence as soon as the rain stops, at which point a torrential downpour (do the authorities have power over the *weather*, too?) begins [HYS, p.315], giving the authorities time ('four years, eleven months, and two days' [HYS, p.320]) to completely exterminate all individuals with knowledge of the truth, and leave only the official version behind.

Two 'official' versions, two unnatural events—the ascension (presumably to Heaven) of a beautiful girl, the wiping from history of a massacre—stand side-by-side as symptoms of the same underlying issue²: the impossibility of truth in South America. Salman Rushdie has written of Márquez' work that 'the damage to reality in South America is at least as much political as cultural. In Márquez' experience, truth has been controlled to the point at which it has ceased to be possible to find out what it is. The only truth is that you are being lied to all the time.' [IH, p.301] The superstitions of the villagers,

2 The reader may be inclined to believe in the ascension of Remedios the Beauty, but the only reason this appears to be true is because it is written from the point of view of the Buiendías family; likewise, we are more inclined to believe in the massacre because we see it through José Arcadio Segundo. Remedios the Beauty's ascension is a pretty 'truth' the family invent, while the authorities have their own pretty set of events behind which they hide the massacre. Both sets of events up end being the accepted truths.

the magical events in which they believe, stem at least in part from the degree to which they are information-poor. The authorities conspire to keep them in this state of poverty, and exploit that state in order to define 'truth' as it befits them most.

Márquez' magic realism 'expresses a genuinely third-world consciousness' [IH, p.301]: it allows us to enter the hearts and minds of the villagers, to experience the miracles and fabulisms in which they believe, but at the same time it allows us to see into the world beyond, to understand how their slippery grasp of truth, while producing a delightful world-view in one sense, lays them open to huge exploitation by the self-interested authorities.

By leaving us with next-to-no alternatives to the miraculous ascension of Remedios the Beauty, and rubbishing those that remain, Márquez (through controlling the information available to us) forces us to accept the 'official' view of the villagers that the miracle took place. At the time, it is a marvelous piece of fantasy that enriches the story. But later Márquez opens up, to show how exactly the same methods of information-withholding are put to use by the authorities for wicked purposes. As readers, we can delight in a magical world: Márquez' narrative shows us the pain, cynicism and hopelessness that lie beneath it.

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When Salman Rushdie writes of the controlling of truth reflected in Márquez' works, he is writing from experience. In his book *The Jaguar Smile*, he recalls 'being in Pakistan during the 1965 war with India, and how it felt to be fed information about which the only certain thing was that it was deliberately and hopelessly misleading' [JS, p.48]. It is a theme that Rushdie has explored in fiction too: aspects of it are to be found in *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses*. But Rushdie's magic realism has its roots less in the beliefs and illusions of peoples as a whole, and more in the inner worlds, the manner of storytelling, of his (not always reliable) narrators.

Events are given mythic and magical status by the way they are described. A crowd celebrating India's independence is called 'the monster in the streets' [MC, p.116]. A man's mental illness is referred to as his 'demon' [EW, p.135]. Thus, a feeling of the amazing, of something extraordinary, is maintained even when the events concerned are 'normal'. The result is that the

reader's attention is drawn to these events in a way they might not otherwise be.

Another result is that by describing the ordinary in extraordinary terms, the truly extraordinary events that occur do not stand out as unnatural: they are merely peaks in an already choppy sea. This is probably less a confidence trick on the part of the narrators, and more a result of the fiercely individual world-views they hold. Their belief in their own stories is strong enough to infect the reader. Here we have a man born at the exact moment of India's independence [MC, p.9]; there, a novelist who is not quite Rushdie just as the country in which his story is set is 'not quite' Pakistan [Sha, p.29]. What about a mysterious figure who may be angel or devil or both but refuses to confirm either? [sv, p.10] Or a man doomed to age at twice the normal rate? [MLS, p.143] None of these are normal narrators; the acceptance of the magic in their stories has its own unique effect in each separate novel.

Midnight's Children is the story of Saleem Sinai, born on the stroke of midnight as India gains its independence, but it is also a tale of India itself, 'a fable full of miracles and witchery', but also 'a process of blunders, opportunism and shattered ideals' [Birkett 1993, p.98] and also an immense family saga. In Saleem's narrative, his family—often he personally—bear witness to many of the important events in Indian history. When Saleem is born, the new Prime Minister Nehru writes to him to say, 'We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own' [MC, p.122], i.e. a mirror of India—a prophecy that, in Saleem's tale, comes true.

In Saleem's tale. Because Saleem is an unreliable narrator: there are numerous errors throughout his text. Some of them, such as the date of Gandhi's assassination, he notices and mentions but, significantly, does not alter in his original narrative: 'I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time.' [MC, p.166] Other mistakes, such as the reference to Ganesh writing down the *Ramayana* [MC, p.149] are left unmentioned. Saleem's distortions do not appear to be wilful—his reference in the final chapter to his 'first out-and-out lie' is accompanied by a comment that 'whatever anyone may think, lying doesn't come easily to Saleem' [MC, p.443], suggesting an admission that, yes, there are mistakes in the narrative, but they are not *intentional*. It is rather that he is writing down events *in the manner in which he remembers them*, and as Rushdie himself has commented, 'his truth is too important to him to allow it to be unseated ... It is memory's truth, he insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own.' [IH, p.25]

At least some of the magical events in the book stem from Saleem's preference for 'memory's truth' over 'established' facts. For instance, his 'presentation of the Emergency in the guise of a six-hundred-and-thirty-five-day-long-midnight' [MC, p.443] is not factually accurate, yet from Saleem's point of view it is very appropriate—the emergency is certainly a long and painful period of darkness for his body and soul, and one can imagine it seeming to be an endless midnight when seen through his memory. The image is also a fitting metaphor for the state of India during this period; the mirror that is Saleem appears highly reflective.

Regarding the Midnight's Children themselves, if we disbelieve in their existence then Saleem's entire narrative falls apart. Let's take a moment to believe: after all, as Saleem says, 'reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real' [MC, p.200].

... Regarding the Midnight's Children, one can see in them a fascinating mirror of India-at-independence, with all the individual cravings and aspirations, fears and hopes, that lie beneath the surface of the nation, bursting to get out:

collectivism ... and individualism ... filial duty ... and infant revolution ... capitalism ... and altruism ... science ... and religion ... courage ... and cowardice ... there were declarations of women's rights and pleas for the lot of untouchables; landless children dreamed of land and tribals from the hills, of Jeeps; and there were, also, fantasies of power.

[MC, p.228]

The ultimate fate of the Midnight's Children, their '-ectomisation' at the hands of Indira Gandhi's minions [MC, p.439], is an apt metaphor for the destroyed hopes of a nation, the impotence to which its people have been reduced at the hands of corrupt leaders. Through this reality-with-metaphorical-content, Rushdie is able to give voice to both the individual sufferings of those abused by the authorities, and the reality of a nation adrift, having lost the ideals, the willpower and the hope that were present at the time of independence: qualities that have been thoroughly '-ectomised' by those who claim to speak for and act in the interests of the nation, but who in fact speak and act only for themselves³.

3 Witness, for example, the comment made by the Widow's Hand (as Saleem calls her) that Indira Gandhi is the one true God of India, a 'manifestation of the OM' [MC, p.438], and the 'in-those-days-famous phrase: *India is Indira and Indira is India*' [MC, p.420], when in fact 'the Widow' is a paranoid tyrant.

How are we to read *Midnight's Children*? How to reconcile an extraordinary story that one instinctively wants to believe⁴ with a narrator we know to be unreliable? Rushdie has written that 'Saleem's greatest desire is for what he calls meaning, and ... he sets out to *write himself*, in the hope that by doing so he may achieve the significance that the events of his adulthood have drained from him. He is no dispassionate, disinterested chronicler. He wants to shape his material so the reader will be forced to concede his central role.' [IH, p.24] Considering this, alongside the fact that Saleem 'is capable of distortions both great and small' [IH, p.24], suggests that the *Midnight's Children*, along with the other magics in the novel, are mostly inventions on Saleem's part to back up his case. Born on the stroke of midnight as India gains its independence, written to by Prime Ministers, his life *must* have significance... And so he invents this story, this idea that 'because of those blindly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country' [MC, p.9], and writes history around himself (magical inventions included) to justify this idea. In this view of the novel, the magic realism becomes the shield which Saleem uses to defend himself against the real world.

Or does it? Recall Rushdie's other comment, that Saleem's story is 'memory's truth' [IH, p.25]. Saleem's narrative (magic, mistakes and all) can be seen as a critique of the notion of 'history' as it stands. The 'factual' errors and wild fabulisms that spring from Saleem's memories can be seen as an attack on the idea that an objective, impersonal form of history can be obtained. In his essay 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie comments: 'Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images ... the novel is one way of denying the official, *politicians'* version of the truth' [IH, p.14] (my emphasis). He goes on to attack certain 'state truths' in India and Pakistan, such as the idea that there were no human rights abuses during Indira Gandhi's period of Emergency, or during the conflicts between the West and East Wings of Pakistan. (Both these 'state truths' are contradicted in Saleem's tale.) From this point of view, *Midnight's Children* suggests that *all* histories are subjective and all historians (including politicians, the *makers* of history) are potentially susceptible to writing themselves into a (not necessarily justified) central role; indeed, that they may often have done so, and what we think of as objective is in fact frequently His or Her Story.

4 Rushdie writes: 'Ironically, the book's success ... initially distorted the way in which it was read. Many readers wanted it to be the history ... which it was never meant to be.' [IH, p. 25] Readers clearly sympathise with Saleem's version of events.

Through Saleem's intensely personal *and personalised* history of India, Rushdie is able to shine a light on the millions of histories that exist *in the minds of all the different people throughout the world*, and suggest that any history, any 'official truth', that does not acknowledge that each individual carries around its own head a completely-formed history of the world—their world, perceived and constructed about themselves—will be incomplete, an inadequate picture. The stories that are left out of conventional history speak of our prejudices, of political expediency, of inadequate information-as-regards-the-fact, as well as our ability to discern untruths. A historian who does not take these factors into account is in danger of allowing history to be abused. The Widow of *Midnight's Children* and the corrupt authorities of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are two of the abusers, writing history to serve their own purposes.

Rushdie's essay "Errata": or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children* concludes with the following words:

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of Saleem's unreliable narration might be, I believed, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to 'read' the world.

[IH, p.25]

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'But how do they do it?' Chamcha wanted to know.

'They describe us,' the other whispered solemnly. 'That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.'

—from *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie [SV, p.168]

Throughout human history, the apostles of purity, those who have claimed to possess a total explanation, have wrought havoc among mere mixed-up human beings. Like many millions of people, I am a bastard child of history. Perhaps we all are, black and brown and white, leaking into one another, as a character of mine once said, *like flavours when you cook*.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie explores concepts of reality, showing how assumptions and prejudices can shape not just how individuals perceive the world, but, more importantly, those ideas that go down in history as 'objective' truths. *The Satanic Verses*, while including elements of this, has a somewhat different focus. Here, Rushdie is less concerned with the ways in which people shape the world around them, and more concerned with those who, when picking a reality to clothe themselves with, select it with a 'one size fits all' mentality.

'*The Satanic Verses*,' Rushdie writes in his essay 'In Good Faith', 'celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling ... It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure.' [IH, p.394] The book takes issue with 'imposed orthodoxies of all types,' with 'the view that the world is quite clearly This and not That' [IH, p.396]. Throughout the book, the reader is shown the flaws in absolutist certainties, and the damage that results from these certainties, ranging from literal physical damage (Sikh terrorists blowing up an aeroplane [SV, pp.86-7]) to crises of identity (the self-righteousness of both Changez and Saladin leads to many years' estrangement between father and son [SV, pp.35-49]).

As well as exploring different issues, *The Satanic Verses* uses a different variety of magic realism to *Midnight's Children*. While the magic still has its origins in the narrator of the tale, it is not the result of an interpretation of reality: rather, the story is a work of fabulist fiction whose Author (who should probably be distinguished from Rushdie, though the two share certain characteristics) pops up from time to time as a character in his own work, on occasion even going so far as to appear to his characters [SV, pp.318, 409]. 'As to omnipresence and -potence, I'm making no claims at present,' he notes in the first chapter [SV, p.10], but as Author he creates a magical reality for his characters, a world where two men can survive a fall of 29,002 feet [SV, pp.3-10] and in the process begin a transformation where one takes on an angelic, one a devilish appearance [SV, p.133]. Being an Author he is also able to sneak into places, to observe things that his characters cannot.

Within this fiction-within-a-fiction, the magical aspects of the story become symbols of deeper, unsettling issues. Saladin Chamcha has spent his life trying to become a 'goodandproper Englishman' [SV, p.43], managing to hide behind a voice that can be turned into whatever the audience wants, but having to hide his face from public view [SV, p.60]. His transformation into a devil-like

goat-man is a physical manifestation of the 'good and proper English' perception of him: the 'fucking Packy' [sv, p.163], an untrustworthy, threatening presence, a subhuman carnal being. His mask of Englishness has slipped, and he succumbs to the prejudices of his adopted country, to the English descriptions of (non-white) migrants. D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke refers to Saladin's thought that 'This isn't England' [sv, p.158]—'not the England of his colonial concept but an England where the immigrant is demonised and is helplessly at the mercy of the law' [Goonetilleke 1998, p.78]. The Author allows this 'demonisation' to be applied literally to his unfortunate character.

Rushdie invests this with more meaning, though, noting that 'If migrant groups are called devils by others, that does not really make them demonic. And if devils are not necessarily devilish, angels may not necessarily be angelic... From this premise, the novel's exploration of morality as internal and shifting (rather than external, divinely sanctioned, absolute) may be said to emerge.' [IH, pp.402-3]⁵ Saladin's transformation, and his later meeting with others similarly demonised [sv, pp.167-9], is not just an exposé of the racial prejudice found in British society but also of the inherent flaws to be found in absolutist ideas.

The rejection of absolutism is also to be found in the dreams that Gibreel experiences, dreams in which he takes on the role of his namesake—Gibreel Farishta, the Angel Gabriel—and in which he witnesses the incident of the Satanic Verses, allowing Rushdie 'to examine what such an incident might reveal about what revelation is, about the extent to which the mystic's conscious personality informs and interacts with the mystical event' [IH, p.408]. In Gibreel's dream, at least according to Salman the Persian, the Prophet Mahound's personality is present throughout his revelations [sv, pp.363-8]; in addition, the Satanic Verses and the rejection of them both spring from the same source, Gibreel himself [sv, p.123]. The implication is that the Prophet's truths are, like any other person's point of view, subjective; they are not absolute⁶.

5 This message is reinforced by the transformation of Saladin's travelling companion Gibreel Farishta, who takes on the appearance of an angel—an equally misleading label. Neither Saladin nor Gibreel lives up to their appearance: both men commit both good and evil acts.

6 In addition to the investigation of the 'nature of revelation', Rushdie notes that 'the rejection of the three goddesses in the novel's dream-version of the "satanic verses" story is also intended to make other points, for example about religious attitudes towards women. "Shall He [God] have daughters while you have sons? That would be an unjust division," read the verses still to be found in the Qur'an. ... One of the reasons for rejecting these goddesses was *that they were female*. The rejection has implications that are worth thinking about.' [IH, pp.399-400]

But at the same time *they are not meaningless*. Gibreel's other dream sequence, the pilgrimage of Ayesha and the villagers from Titlipur, can be seen as a positive view of faith: D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke writes that 'it must not be simply presumed that [the villagers] were drowned and the pilgrimage interpreted as illustrating the delusions and cruelty of fanaticism' [Goonetilleke 1998, p. 95]. Some of the 'survivors' witness the sea opening for the others as Ayesha claimed it would [sv, pp.504-5], and in the end the sceptic Mirza Saeed Akhtar is also borne to Mecca 'across the bed of the Arabian Sea' [sv, pp.506-7]. Goonetilleke comments: 'In *The Satanic Verses* miracles occur. The ending of the Ayesha episode is one such.' [Goonetilleke 1998, p.95] It is a miracle that springs from the villagers' faith: the absolutism that says all faith is meaningless is also unacceptable.

Running alongside all this are realistic events whose implications parallel those of the magical ones. Saladin's certainty in the righteousness of English tradition is utterly flawed. It is a world that cannot accept him unless his face is hidden from view [sv, p.61], and his blind belief in it is a form of self-abasement and denial. The dogmas of the Christian creationist Eugene Dumsday are shown to be ridiculous [sv, pp.75-7]. Hal Valance's absolute belief in the ideals of 'Mrs Torture' ultimately leads to his downfall [sv, p.517]. But such ideals as human love are shown to be ultimately triumphant, as between Saladin and Zeeny [sv, p.547], Mishal and Hanif [sv, pp.515-16], and in the reconciliation between Saladin and his father [sv, p.523]; in addition, Saladin's acceptance that he is a hybrid being, that there is more to him than some clichéd notion of a 'goodandproper Englishman'—his Indian origins being a part of this—'completes his process of regeneration' [Goonetilleke 1998, p.91] into what might be described as a Goodandproper Human Being.

Ultimately, *The Satanic Verses* is a celebration of the multicultural, the plural. In his lecture 'Is Nothing Sacred?' Rushdie refers to his belief that 'exceptionality' is 'the greatest and most heroic of values ... those who were unlike the crowd were to be treasured most lovingly' [IH, p.425]. Writing about *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie commented, in response to criticism that the novel was pessimistic about India, that 'the form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy' [IH, p.16]. One could make a similar point about *The Satanic Verses*, a novel that 'is itself a plurality: of worlds, cultures, voices, styles' [Gibson 1999, p.207]: Rushdie celebrates the mixing-pot that is the world, and the fact that it *is* a mixing-pot, and not just individual flavours, separated, kept from mixing.

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'There's the hairdressing,' she thought, 'that alone will take an hour of my morning; there's looking in the looking-glass, another hour; there's staying and lacing; there's washing and powdering; there's changing from silk to lace and from lace to paduasoy; there's being chaste year in year out...' Here she tossed her foot impatiently, and showed an inch or two of calf. A sailor on the mast, who happened to look down at the moment, started so violently that he missed his footing and only saved himself by the skin of his teeth.

—from *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf [Orl, p.110]

Beulah is a profane place. It is a crucible. It is the home of a woman who calls herself the Great Parricide, also glories in the title of Grand Emasculator; ecstasy their only anaesthetic, the priests of Cybele sheared off their parts to exalt her, ran bleeding, psalmodising, crazed through the streets. This woman has many names but her daughters call her Mother. Mother has made herself into an incarnated deity; she has quite transformed her flesh, she has undergone a painful metamorphosis of the entire body and become the abstraction of a natural principle. She is also a great scientist who makes extraordinary experiments and I was destined to become the subject of one of them; but I was ignorant of everything when, fainting, I arrived in Beulah.

—from *The Passion of New Eve* by Angela Carter [PNE, p.49]

Midnight's Children and *The Satanic Verses* are both, arguably, explorations of identity: the former, an investigation of how we identify ourselves in the world, how we build the world around us, the latter questioning the need for an identity to have a solid, absolute base on which it must be built. But in many ways they deal with these issues in an indirect way, using stylistic elements such as form or narrative to make their points as much as actual events in the story. And while other issues—human rights abuses, racism—are addressed, they are not the main focus of the story, but particular cases within the wider scope of the whole novel.

The last two novels we will examine, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, have a narrower focus but, by doing so, can examine the more specific band of issues they address in greater detail.

Both are, like the Rushdie novels, explorations of identity, but they are concerned in particular with concepts of *male and female identity*, exploring the meanings of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, and the degree to which those characteristics considered to be ‘typically male’ or ‘typically female’ are not natural characteristics, but are constructed by the society that surrounds us.

Both include, as their central magical event, a transformation from male to female. In *Orlando* this simply *happens*, and all attempts to dispute the fact are simply set aside [Orl, pp.97-8]. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the central character Evelyn is transformed into the ‘new Eve’ through extreme plastic surgery [PNE, pp.70-75]. Both explore aspects of gender and sexuality, and how these two different issues relate. Their approach, however, differs quite considerably. *Orlando* is an often comic tale, a journey through history, and a loving gift for Woolf’s friend Vita Sackville-West. *The Passion of New Eve* is set in what was (for Carter) a very possible immediate future, a civil war in America between various extremist groups, and is littered with examples of stereotypical male and female identities, from myth and legend, art and tradition: stereotypes in which the flaws are made clear. It is also an explicitly sexual tale, and the transformation from Evelyn to Eve allows Carter to view sexuality from both male and female perspectives, yet within the same character. By contrast, the portrayal of sexuality in *Orlando* tends to be more subtle, and more closely linked to concepts of ‘male’ and ‘female’.

It is important to appreciate *Orlando* as a present for a friend, and a friend with an exceptional personality, ‘a scion of the aristocracy, ... both the mother of two sons and a notorious “Sapphist”, who made no attempt to conceal her attraction to, and affairs with, women’ [Orl, p.xiii]. Combine this with notions of the time, that ‘we may not know what sex is, but we do know that it is mutable ... there are many stages between a complete male and a complete female’ [Orl, p.xvii]⁷ and one can see where Woolf’s notions of sexuality come from. These ideas, that *male* and *female* are fairly immutable points of reference, but that *individual people* may move about freely between these points, differ quite considerably from more modern concepts of gender and sexuality, differ, indeed, from those found in *The Passion of New Eve*. Vita, who clearly found no problem in moving freely between the ‘male’ and ‘female’, sets the scene for a character who will make a very explicit transition of this nature, and continue to make more subtle transitions afterwards.

7 The quote is originally from Havelock Ellis’ 1933 book *The Psychology of Sex*, and is quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert’s Introduction to the Penguin Twentieth Century Classics edition of *Orlando*.

The perceived differences between man and woman (as opposed to male and female) are often comically ridiculed. For example, throughout the part of the book where Orlando is a man, the reader is continually reminded of Orlando's shapely legs, described early-on as 'the finest legs a young nobleman has ever stood upright upon' [Orl, p.17]. Shortly after Orlando's transformation, she is travelling back to England on board a ship when the sight of 'an inch or two of calf' [Orl, p.110] nearly kills a sailor when the shock causes him to miss his footing on the mast. The extreme silliness of this—that 'a woman's beauty has to be covered lest a sailor may fall from a mast-head' [Orl, p.110]—also causes Orlando to realise the many restrictions placed on female behaviour by English society, and thus discover the implicit paranoia of 'the other sex, the manly' [Orl, p.113]. Ultimately, it seems, both sexes are flawed:

And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirligig state of mind to be in. The comforts of ignorance seemed utterly denied her ... she pitted one sex against the other, and found each alternately full of the most deplorable infirmities...

[Orl, p.113]

Through her transformation, her embodiment of male and female in one person, Orlando is able to see past society's constraints, and to experience the desire to break free of the stifling boundaries of being only *male* or only *female*. And indeed Orlando later finds a freedom in her androgyny, being able to dress as a man and pass as one in society [Orl, p.153] and, indeed, to seduce other women [Orl, p.153].

The man Orlando marries, the rather extravagantly-named Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, is likewise someone whose gender, in the concepts of male and female outlined previously, is in doubt: "'You're a woman, Shel!" she cried. "You're a man, Orlando!" he cried.' [Orl, pp.174-5] (Shelmerdine is based on Vita's husband Harold Nicholson who, like his wife, was 'flamboyantly bisexual' [Orl, p.xiii].) It is to each of them 'a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman' [Orl, p.179]. The revelation is perhaps that, while each of them might have considered themselves unique in their androgynous nature, on meeting each other they discover this is not so. Thus, Woolf suggests, this ability to

travel between the poles of male and female is not unique; it is something others are capable of too, and it might arguably be inferred that what Woolf is really saying is that it is something *all* others are capable of. Orlando's physical change becomes a way of stressing the mutability of gender in the modern world, and thus the utter inadequacy of the conventional notions of *male* and *female* to describe human beings.

We should not ignore the other magical aspect of *Orlando*: the barely-ageing progression through hundreds of years of history, which in Woolf's hands becomes a way of reclaiming the past from the bias of (male) historians, a way of writing 'the history not of "Great Men" but of women and of, in Woolf's own phrase, "the obscure", the history that falls into the interstices between the chronicles of princes and kings' [Orl, p.xxii]. Orlando's story takes place largely on the periphery of conventional history; Woolf paints a picture, thus, of the marginalisation of women in the history books, but also tells us what the books do not, giving us a picture of the experience of women throughout history, and the way this differs from the experience of men. Returning from Turkey not long after her transformation, Orlando realises that

'I shall never be able to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth, or draw my sword and run him through the body, or sit among my peers, or wear a coronet, or walk in procession, or sentence a man to death, or lead an army, or prance down Whitehall on a charger, or wear seventy-two different medals on my breast'

[Orl, p.113]

—in short, she will never be able to do any of the things that grant someone a place in the history books. Woolf's fictional biography suggests that not only have these restrictions on female behaviour led to a virtual whitewash of women from history, but that these are far from the only criteria for something to be of historical interest: the 'chronicles of the person and the personal, the family romances' [Orl, p.xxii] are just as important subjects for historians.

Angela Carter's *Eve(lyn)*, by contrast with *Orlando*, is not a willing convert to the female form. The change of sex is forced upon him by a mysterious female cult whose intention is to transform him into the perfect woman, who will give birth to a new Messiah [PNE, p.68]. Escaping their captivity, the new Eve is thrown into a journey of exploration, of her new female self and how it

relates to her old, male identity. Unlike Orlando the change is psychological as well as physical: Eve stays heterosexual in her new form⁸.

Carter's America is populated by a fascinating variety of male and female archetypes. These characters are given the status of deities within their own worlds: Mother, the 'Castratrix of the Phallic Universe' [PNE, p.175]; Zero the poet, prophet and progenitor-to-be of a new America, and his harem of dutiful wives; Tristessa, the screen goddess; Leilah/Lilith, the 'sacred harlot' [PNE, p.175]. It is Eve, the woman who has been a man, who is able to see past these false gods to the possibilities that lie beyond them.

None of these archetypes is, for Eve, a complete or even appropriate picture of male or female, masculine or feminine. Mother, the 'self-appointed prophetess' [PNE, p.58], has a 'streak of inexorable vulgarity' [PNE, p.72]; it is significant that in creating the new Eve, she picks a concept of the 'perfect woman' that is particularly masculine in origin, the *Playboy* centrefold [PNE, p.75]. Her idea that appearance is what determines the essence of a person may be well-founded in Freud [OH, p.xx], but it is fundamentally unsatisfactory, ignoring as it does the possibility of, not least, transsexuality⁹. Her comment that 'sexuality is a unity manifested in different structures' [PNE, p.66] might please Virginia Woolf, but her vision of a world with 'all the phallic towers broken down' [PNE, p.79], a world where masculinity or maleness is destroyed, would probably disappoint the writer: as we have already noted, Woolf reveals in *Orlando* her distaste for the idea of being solely male or solely female. The rather pessimistic tone with which Eve views such plans suggests that Carter might well agree.

Zero the Poet is another false prophet. He claims the status of 'Masculinity incarnate' [PNE, p.104], yet he is trapped in a dead end, both physically in the falling-apart miners' town [PNE, p.93], and spiritually, through his obsession with Tristessa [PNE, p.92]. He is a 'habitual coward' [PNE, p.102], and truly impotent (not just reproductively), since his power is only a result of others' submission [PNE, p.102]. While his wives willingly submit to him, finding irresistible his 'air of authority' that is only created *by* their submission [PNE, p.99-100], Eve, who was once a man, can see past the macho bluster to the broken man that lies beneath. Her realisation that, as a man, she was more powerful than Zero, 'more of a man, in fact; hadn't my manhood sent Leilah off to the Haitian abortion—

8 'A change in the appearance will restructure the essence,' Evelyn is told when he queries the possibility of his truly being changed into a woman [PNE, p.68].

9 When Tristessa requests that Mother alter his form to match his essence—that of a female—one of Mother's grounds for refusing is his 'awfully ineradicable quality of ... maleness' [PNE, p.173]. Given her earlier attitudes, one might think that this is not least due to the fact that he is, physically, male.

ist?' [PNE, p.107] is one of the factors that prevents her submitting to his will. The sentiment, potency = masculinity, is fairly nauseous, but that does not refute the argument that the realisation helps build Eve's strength, helps turn her into 'a savage woman' [PNE, p.108], a woman who will not submit to domination of any form.

It is with Tristessa, the man rather than the screen goddess, that this 'savage woman' finds solace. The man who was turned into a woman and, from Eve's point of view, the woman who is transformed into a man, are in a sense natural partners. The screen goddess, like all the 'deities' Eve meets on her journey, is a flawed ideal; Eve has already rejected the notion of being a suffering woman through her ordeal with Zero. The revelation of Tristessa's true gender is also a reminder of the impossibility of the female ideal: 'How could a real woman,' Eve wonders, 'ever have been so much a woman as you?' [PNE, p.129]. The sexual ecstasy to which the two of them eventually come is a reminder of Mother's idea that 'sexuality is a unity manifested in different structures' [PNE, p.66]; they are perfect lovers, not because either of them embodies masculinity or femininity, but because both, by this point, have been able to acknowledge the influence of both these aspects within their personalities.

Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure of that—the quality and its negation are locked in necessity. But what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female, if they have anything to do with Tristessa's so long neglected apparatus or my own factory fresh incision and engine-tuned breasts, that I do not know.

[PNE, pp.149-50]

In the ecstasy of Eve and Tristessa, Carter celebrates the realisation that there are no hard-and-fast links between gender and sexuality, gender and personality, between the physical form and notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine'. It is a similar revelation to that experienced in *Orlando*, and indeed in Eve and Tristessa we can see a similar couple to Orlando and Shelmerdine: the woman who is 'free-spoken as a man', the man who is 'strange and subtle as a woman' [Orl, p.179]. There are no real boundaries between the sexes, Woolf and Carter suggest, only those constructed by others. Their sex-changing characters, Orlando and Eve(lyn), not only allow them to explore the nature of male and female within a single frame, but act as a strong metaphor for the spiritual and sexual mutability that is possible within the real world.

If nothing else, these different varieties of magic realism may convince the reader that there are many diverse issues that can be addressed with these techniques. Indeed, the differences between the works investigated may suggest to the reader that they should be considered as different styles of writing. Yet the similarities between these works demand that they be investigated as a whole.

The issues. It is perhaps unsurprising that a style of writing that rejects the traditional conventions of realism should address issues concerned with truth, with traditional assumptions. Gabriel García Márquez attacks abuses of truth, in particular the information control practised by authorities in South America. Rushdie attacks similar efforts at information control practised in India and Pakistan, and also questions our assumptions about the objectivity of history¹⁰. In *The Satanic Verses* he exposes the racism at the heart of British attitudes to non-white immigrants, attitudes that originate, he suggests in his essay 'The New Empire Within Britain', from what were considered to be 'truths' at the time of the British Empire [II, p.130], such as 'one of the key concepts of imperialism, that military superiority implied cultural superiority' [III, p.131-2]. At the same time he celebrates the plural, the truly multicultural, exposing the lie that immigration, the mixer of cultures, is the Problem that (white) politicians portray it to be.

Rushdie also reveals the inherent problems that reside with any absolutist view of the world, any One True Way. While Rushdie considers the general case, Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter confront very particular absolutisms, the absolutism of the immutability of gender and sexuality, the generally assumed 'truths' about the sexes. At which point we come full circle: *the very act of writing 'magic realism' is a rebellion against absolutism*. It is a style that says: *I refuse to be bound by what 'everybody knows'. No truth is absolute. The real world is as big as our imagination makes it.*

10 The reader may doubt this is a 'goodandproper' real world issue, but consider the case raised by Virginia Woolf in *Orlando*, where Woolf raises the issue of women having been written out of history. We recognise this as a real-world issue because we recognise women's rights as a real-world issue: Rushdie suggests that, just as the lack of women in history books is an example of the traditional marginalisation of women in society, so we may find in history clues to other prejudices in ourselves. The search for, and desire to eliminate, prejudice in our society is a very real issue, and *Midnight's Children*, by suggesting to us a way to discover these prejudices, is addressing it.

Many issues had to be left out of this essay, such as Rushdie's political satire *Shame*, and also *The Moor's Last Sigh*, which discusses (among other things) the growing religious tensions within Indian society. (Where Britain defines 'immigrants' by colour, in India certain politicians and leaders consider certain groups to be lesser citizens by virtue of religion [IH, pp.22-33].) Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*, a magic realist vision of Nazi Germany, and the works of Isabel Allende, are sad omissions.

Why the magic? Why, some readers might ask, do authors need to use magical or miraculous events to address these issues? The answer is different in each case, but we should still bear in mind the point previously made, that magic realism is inherently a rejection of the absolutist, the traditional. Writers like Rushdie have used the form of magic realism, the possibility for variety and wonder that it opens up, as metaphors for the issues they address—celebrations of plurality, visions of hope for a nation. Márquez uses magic realism to write from the viewpoint of the villagers of Macondo, to give the empathic connection with their position, that we mentioned in the introduction to this essay.

As regards Woolf and Carter, the reader might argue: it is obvious that these writers possess the ability to imagine the innermost thoughts of man and woman, to explore these two natures with their minds. Why then do they need these gender-bending characters? But if the writer can enter the minds of both man and woman, how much more interesting their insights become if they pour these insights into *a single character*, a single person who can explore both male and female realities. The use of separate characters to explore male and female automatically suggests there is an immutable division between the two: something that is difficult to tolerate if, like Woolf, like Carter, the writer disagrees with such a proposition.

Why the realism? Why (our reader is still unsatisfied) does the writer need the 'real world' hanging around their fantasies? Why is it that, as Julian Birkett notes, 'the realism is quite as important as the magic' [Birkett 1993, p.98]? This time, the reasons are perhaps more similar for each work, although they still differ in each case. The use of what is recognisable as the 'real world' as the backdrop to the magical events brings a level of immediacy, of involvement, to the issues raised. Science fiction can raise issues about humanity, it's true. The Klingons represent our violent, animal side, but also our sense of honour, our courage. The Vulcans are our logical, intellectual side, but they lack compassion. But it is easy to laugh off actors in odd makeup: 'Oh, it's only make-believe.'

Would *Midnight's Children* be half as effective if Saleem's tale was set, not in India, but in some distant Xanadu? For a start, we would lose the effect of Saleem's unreliable narrative (an example of 'realism' at work in itself). Not only do errors about, e.g., the date of Gandhi's assassination seem more important to us because it's a *real fact*, a part of *our* history, but errors about a fantasy-world would have to be continually pointed out to us, thus losing much of the subtlety of the work: there would either have to be less errors, or else we wouldn't even start to believe Saleem, so often would he have to say, 'Oops. Another mistake.' And hence we would lose, not just the aspect of the novel that is a satire of the politics and politicians who have shaped India and Pakistan, but the whole point about our reality being shaped by prejudice and ignorance as well as more positive attributes. The point is *we aren't aware of these prejudices*, and this is why they are dangerous. By putting Saleem into a position where is prejudice and ignorance would be revealed explicitly to him, as well as to us, every time he is mistaken, this point is destroyed.

In *Orlando* Virginia Woolf attacks, amongst other things, the way that conventional history excludes women. By placing Orlando within this history, she is able to make these attacks from directly within the territory she wishes to conquer. If Orlando were *not* placed within this territory, this whole aspect of the story would be lost. To eschew realism and the use of 'the real world' would be a restriction just as great as eschewing all aspects of the fabulous, a restriction of the territory the writer has available to explore. *I refuse, the writer says, to believe that there is nothing of use in the world around me. Just as I question what 'everybody knows', so I question the idea that all this knowledge is worthless. No truth is absolute, but that does not mean they are all lies.*

The techniques of magic realism can, potentially, give a writer the best of both worlds. Through magical events, writers can find new viewpoints, construct new metaphors through which to view the world. Through the realistic world in which these magical events occur, the stories stay immediate, intimate. Works of magic realism are not mere fantasies, that can be dismissed as works of escapism, but they refuse to be bound by the constraints of 'real life' and hence provide new ways, not just of writing, but indeed of thinking about, and thus addressing, the issues that face us every day. Early on in the essay we mentioned a comment, by a character of Neil Gaiman's, that 'Magic is a method of talking to the universe in words that it cannot ignore' [BoM, II]. The words, in the context of magic realism, seem more relevant than ever.

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The title of the essay is misappropriated (or should that be mis-misappropriated?) from Neil Gaiman's graphic novel *The Kindly Ones*, where a character is seen reading a book titled *When Real Things Happen To Imaginary People*. This itself is a parody of *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*, the title of a mid-1980s bestseller by Rabbi Harold Kushner.

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