

# Self-reflexivity, Playfulness and Magical Realism in Marquez's "Light Is Like Water": A Study from the Postmodern Perspective

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## Abstract

The platform for Gabriel Garcia Marquez's new sources of motions of his writings is described to draw the theme of new visions in postmodernist literary intellectual stadium exceeding conventional forms and norms. Marquez's "Light Is Like Water" is rational, analytical, mathematical, philosophical, intuitive, imaginative, hyperreal, magical, self-reflexive and playful. An assessment of Marquez's literary career is hardly complete if his writings of simulacra, self-reflexivity, narrative fragmentation, post-structuralism, viability of the system of representation, play with formal devices and realism, playfulness and imagination are not taken into account. This is a qualitative and inductive research and the sources are parted in the development of various aspects of the paper for the virile comprehension and exact interpretation of the postmodernist theory. The paper tries to explore how Marquez creates simulacra/hyperreality in his "Light Is Like Water". The researcher attempts to examine how Marquez takes magical actions within the realistic setting in his story. Thus, the focal point of this article is to analyze Marquez's intelligentsia with special emphasis on "Light Is Like Water" dealing with postmodern elements such as self-reflexivity, playfulness and Magic Realism.

**Keywords:** hyperreality, imagination, magic realism, narrative fragmentation, representation

## Introduction

Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014) was a Colombian novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter journalist and poet. He contributes a lot in the field Latin American literary works that have been crystallized into a palpable and undeniable entity in the arena of world literature. He was awarded a lot of prizes for his literary deeds. He was awarded the Neustadt International Prize in 1972 and the world's most prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in 1982. He started his writings as a journalist. He wrote many acclaimed non-fiction works and short stories. According to Martin (2008), during his literary career, Marquez has produced many literary works that have been translated into more than thirty well-known languages and published with more than twenty million copies till now. Marquez's all works have appeared in English translation. Some of them are listed in order of their original, Spanish-language publication: *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1961), *In Evil Hour* (1962), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* (1970), *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981), *The Fragrance of Guava* (1982)

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with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, *The Solitude of Latin America* (1982), *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), *Clandestine in Chile* (1986), *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), *Of Love and Other Demons* (1994), *News of a Kidnapping* (1996), *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* (2004), *Strange Pilgrims* (1993), etc. Marquez's "Light Is Like Water" along with other twelve short stories was published in *Strange Pilgrims*. It is one of his exquisite short stories in which he customizes simulacra, self-reflexivity, narrative fragmentation, play with formal devices and realism, playfulness and imagination to suit himself as a postmodernist writer. The household objects that are used such as dishes, spoons, dinner table, ashtrays, toothpaste, brush, birds, condoms, television, electricity and so on in his writings to suit the features of the postmodern literature. He plays with those formal devices and realism for magical actions. The evidence is found in the following:

The sofa and easy chairs covered in leopard skin were floating at different levels in the living room, among the bottles from the bar and the grand piano with its Manila shawl that...Everyone's toothbrush floated in the bathroom, along with Papa's condoms and Mama's jars of creams and her spare bridge; and the television set from the master bedroom floated on its side. (Marquez, "Light Is Like Water")

Marquez uses the variety of household objects such as "insects, dishes, spoons, dinner table, ashtrays, nose-rings, website, birds, a doctor's name card, a house nameplate and so on", (In the Introduction, Prabhat Choudhury) in his story. "Light Is Like Water" is a tiny playful and serious story. The above personification used in the story shows playfulness. "[T]he sofa and easy chairs have leopard skin and they are floating at different levels in the living room" in the light of water. Readers may be burning into questions but they do not ask because they know how Marquez makes "Light Is Like Water" playful, self-reflexive, imaginative and hyper-real. "Light Is Like Water" begins with two little intelligent boys, Toto and Joel who ask their parents for a rowboat in return for their excellent grades in the elementary school. When their parents finally buy them the rowboat, they break one of their living rooms glowing bulbs. Light pours out of the broken bulbs as cool as water. The boys let it run almost six feet. Then they turn out electricity, take out the rowboat and navigate it in their room at their wills closing the doors and windows of the room when their parents went to movies. They are also given driving equipment for the rowboat later when they get prizes in the semester final examination. The boys are lords and masters of the house, practice it every Wednesday in absence of their parents who come back from the movie and see them sleeping like angles in a dry land. In the awarded ceremony at the end of the year the boys get the certificate of excellences and the public recognitions from their Headmaster in the entire

school. This time their parents ask them what they want. Toto and Joel want to have a party at their house to treat their classmates. On the following Wednesday they invite their 37 school friends in the party to go on sailing by breaking all the glowing bulbs of their living rooms. All the boys end up their lives in the light of flood at fifth floor apartment at Real Madrid in Spain where there is no ocean or river and whose land-bound indigenous population has never mastered the art of navigating on light. Latin American Literature consists of the oral and written literature of Latin America in several languages particularly in Spanish, Portuguese and the indigenous of the Americans as well as literature of the United States written in the Spanish language. It rose to particular prominence globally during the second half of the 20th century largely due to the international success of the style known as “magical realism”. Marquez’s backgrounds always offer significant messages to the reader about his literary deeds and the realities of his country. In his interview with Claudia Dryfus in *Playboy*, Marquez says that:

Clearly, the Latin American environment is marvelous. Particularly the Caribbean. I happen to come from the Caribbean part of Colombia, which is a fantastic place—completely different from the Andean part, the highlands. To grow up in such an environment is to have fantastic resources for poetry... As a child growing up in the Caribbean village of Aracataca, I heard wonderful stories of people who were able to move chairs by simple looking at them (Dryfus 1983b: p.112).

Octavio Paz argues, “postmodernism is an imported grand recite that is incompatible with the cultural production of Latin America” (Sharma, R. & Dr. Preety Chaudhary 2011: p.193) and Marquez tries to synthesize the multiple layers of consciousness in them. He indeed for writing new styles in literature is a remarkable figure in the postmodern era and continuously contributed to the field of Latin American Literature.

Postmodernism is a literary term emerging from Modernism. Scholars have widely different definitions of Postmodernism, because the terms “Modernism” and “Postmodernism” often overlap, and the boundaries between the two vary with variation in usage. Postmodernism is certainly a new form of contemporary culture. Like many contemporary literary theories, the postmodernist literary works put into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism, autonomy, transcendence, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness and so on in origin. Postmodernism rejects the tragic and pessimistic elements of Modernism. Terry Eagleton says, “Postmodernism is among other things a sick joke at the expense of revolutionary avant-gardism”. Postmodernism welcomes and

celebrates everything and accepts reality. Hawthorne has also posited that certain Modernist characteristics when taken to their extreme forms may produce Postmodernism. "Postmodern culture, then, has a contradictory relationship to what we usually label our dominant, liberal humanist culture." (Newman 1985: p.42; Palmer 1977: p.364). Postmodernism differs from this, not in its humanistic contradictions, but in the provisionality of its response to them: it refuses to posit any structure or, what Lyotard (1984a) calls, master narrative—such as art or myth— which, for such modernists, would have been consolatory. Frederic Jameson argues strongly that Postmodernism is a "cultural dominant: a conception that allows for the presence and co-existence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features." (Jameson 1991: p.55) Postmodernism started being talked about in Latin America from the middle of the twentieth century, mainly in relation to the supernatural elements are treated as mundane. Marquez is a product of the Postmodernist Era. His writings depict the literary characteristics such as self-reflexivity, playfulness and magic realism blurring of distinctions between genres. He [Marquez], without any problems, exemplified the postmodern "Literature of Replenishment" [simulacra] (McHale). The characteristic that mainly defined the era is the lack of a good narrative (McHale). "Ultimately, literature is nothing but carpentry. With both you are working with reality, a material just as hard as wood." Many of the authors in Marquez's era believed that there is no truth; they believe life is an illusion (McHale). These traits helped Marquez later in life to become a journalist for a newspaper in Bogota (Fulton). This era was full of politics (McHale). Marquez had the reputation of being intelligent, as well as, being a great postmodern writer (Allen).

In *Strange Pilgrims*, Margaret Sayers Peden asserted in the Chicago Tribune, "Latins do not fare well in their separation from native soil. Rich with allusion and suggestion, colourful like a carnival," wrote Ian Thomson in *Spectator*, "these short stories nevertheless lack the graceful charm.... There's a deadpan acceptance of the fantastic, though, which allows for a degree of comedy." In a similar vein, Dirda asserted: "Many of the stories in *Strange Pilgrims* might be classified as fantastic.... Still, none of them quite possesses the soul-stirring magic of Garcia Marquez's earlier short fictions". Edward Waters Hood, however, declared in *World Literature Today* that these "interesting and innovative stories...complement and add several new dimensions to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's fictional world." In approaching the story from this re-creative stand-point, Garcia Marquez once again utilizes narrative techniques. As Chicago Tribune Book World editor John Blades maintained:

Garcia Marquez tells this grisly little fable in what often appears to be a straight-faced parody of conventional, with its dependence on 'he-she-they told me' narrative techniques, its reliance on the distorted, contradictory

and dreamlike memories of 'eyewitnesses'... at the same time, this is precision-tooled fiction; the author subtly but skillfully manipulates his chronology for dramatic impact.

Marquez's short stories are considered to be magic real, self-reflexive and playful for using of various fantastic elements and realistic elements to popularize out of his narrative techniques. Nicaraguan poet, Gioconda Belli relished an empirical argument to demonstrate both "the reality of magic and the magic of reality". Magical Realism attempts to capture reality by way of a depiction of life's many dimensions, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, rational and mysterious (Brenda 1998: p.32). Salman Rushdie, a British-Indian famous writer states:

Translated into Spanish. It's little wonder I fell in love with it- not for its magic (although, as a writer reared on the fabulous "wonder tales" of the East, that was appealing too) but for its realism.... For such magnificence, our only possible reaction is gratitude. He is the greatest of us all.

Marquez's works are fertilized with multiple layers of meanings particularly by adroitly applying techniques of magic realism, self-reflexivity and playfulness. "[G]arcia Marquez brings up the idea more than once in that playful way of his, so far removed from academic parsimony" (Gioconda Belli 1948). Regarding Marquez's literary deeds Smith states:

Both realistic and fantastic or supernatural events are narrated exactly the same, thus making the reader believe that they are both truthful representations of what is occurring in the story [Light Is Like Water]. This is an important aspect of his writing because it allows for a kind of political, cultural, and even religious leniency in reflecting the cultural aspects (Smith 2008).

Marquez is not content to look at issues just from the surface, but rather to boil every story down to its most vital essence. Marquez rose to prominence as a powerful and serious writer and assiduous storyteller in the literary circles of the world. The New York Times correspondent Christopher Lehmann-Haupt noted a departure from the author's previous style: "I cannot be absolutely certain whether Gabriel Garcia Marquez has come closer to conventional storytelling than in his previous work, or whether I have simply grown accustomed to his imagination". By applying storytelling techniques, Marquez customizes magic realism, self-reflexivity and playfulness in his story. Hamid Ismailov's saying can be culled here:

Storytelling is such an important part of human being and with every story it is human nature to add something sort of magic, something kind of hyperbolic. When you are telling stories, you are sometimes hyperbolizing. And that was the essence of the technique of Marquez and he released this technique for the whole world.

Marquez along with other poets who kept abreast of the time knew that the wings were changing so rapidly that they would soon have to cope with the phenomenon of postmodernism in their writings and continuously contributed to the field of Latin American Literature. [G]abriel Garcia Marquez has given poetry, magic and dignity to Latin American daily life and can thus be thought of as a people's writer" (Bell: p.17). Juan Manuel Santos, the President of Colombia described him as "the greatest Colombian who ever lived".

Marquez's "Light Is Like Water" varies in tone and style to depiction of magic realism, self-reflexivity and playfulness. He intertwines his talents with experiences emphasizing on narratives, mythology and imagination. "Light Is Like Water" blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal and can bend time, nature and geography to its will, when the story makes readers believe to the catastrophe of 39 boys who drowned in the light of flood in a room. The tragedy is in the final episode of the story:

At the end of the hall, moving with the current and clutching the oars, with his mask on and only enough air to reach port, Toto sat in the stern of the boat searching for the lighthouse, and Joel, floating in the prow still looked for the north star with the sextant, and floating in the prow, still looked for the north star with the sextant and floating through the entire house were their thirty-seven classmates, eternalized in the moment of peeing into the pot of geraniums, singing the schools song with the words changed to make fun of the headmaster, sneaking a glass of brandy from Papa's bottle. For they had turned on so many lights at the same time that the apartment had flooded, and two entire classes at the elementary school of Saint Julian the Hospitaler drowned on the fifth floor of 47 Paseo de la Castellana. (Marquez, "Light Is Like Water")

Marquez's "Light Is Like Water" is a wishful tale and eruptions of the fantastic dreamlike abstraction in which "[b]oth realistic and fantastic or supernatural events are narrated exactly the same, thus making the reader believe that they are both truthful representations of what is occurring in the story" (Smith 2008). His stories become increasingly self-referential and [h]is scenes and characters are humorous, tragic, mysterious and beset by ironies and fantasies (Petrakis 1923). The

objects that are used in "Light Is Like Water" such as characters, houses, balconies, trees, roads, and movies are real but the actions are very playful, self-reflexive and hyperreal when the 5th floor apartment at 47 Paseo de la Castellana in Madrid is flooded by lights and 39 brilliant students of the two entire classes at the elementary school of Saint Julian the Hospitaller drowned. Obviously the actions of the story are simulacra/hyperreal. The hyperreality is "more real than real" something fake and artificial comes to be more definitive of the real than reality itself (Jean Baudrillard 1929-2007). Marquez makes his "Light Is Like Water" simulacrum which has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum because [i]n his fictional world, anything is possible and everything is believable (Petrakis1923). Marquez uses extra ordinary personification, symbolism, imagery and paradox as a de-familiarizing technique to his writings. To achieve this effect, he also uses the characteristic of de-familiarization of the skin-diving outfits to allow the boys to go diving into the light. The light having the physical properties of water happens "[w]hen a metaphor becomes real" (Faris 176). The metaphor is that when Toto asks Marquez "why the light went on with the touch of a switch". He answers the boy by saying, "Light is like water. You turn the tap and out it comes". This characteristic allows the brothers to row on top of the light as if it were water. Marquez uses personifications, metaphors, and similes to make readers visualize realistically experience of mystic and magic elements [f]ully aware of the transiency of life, his stories fashion realms...(Petrakis 1923). The use of light as water is an example of the "[c]loseness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds" (Faris 172). The two realms are; the realm of reality and the realm of the imaginary. This element becomes obvious when the two brothers "filled the apartment to depth of two fathoms, dove like tame sharks under the furniture, including the beds, and salvaged from the bottom of the light things that had been lost in darkness for years". "Garcia Marquez is a magician of vision and language who does astonishing things with time and reality. He blends legend and history in ways that make the legends seem truer than truth" (Petrakis 1923). Marquez takes the magical actions differently for simulacra mingling real and magic without following norms. This intermixture proves him fruitfully for the rejuvenation of genres at different points of time "[t]he difference of discourses, our history, the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. That difference, far from being the forgotten and recoverable origin, is this dispersion that we are and make" (Foucault, 1970). Marquez investigates reasons but the impulsion is not to seek any total vision. It is merely questions of self-reflexivity. If it finds such a vision, it questions how, in fact, it made it. These happen in a curious manner in postmodern stand. The indications of magic realism in Marquez's "Light Is Like Water" are playful and self-reflexive. We see him functioning magical action in the following:



On Wednesday night, as they did every Wednesday, the parents went to the movies. The boys, lords and masters of the house, closed the doors and windows and broke the glowing bulb in one of the living room lamps. A jet of golden light as cool as water to pour out of the broken bulb, and they let it run to a depth of almost three feet. Then they turned off the electricity, took out the rowboat, and navigated at will among the islands in the house....And so they continued sailing every Wednesday night, learning how to use the sextant and the compass, until their parents came home from the movies and found them sleeping like angels on dry land.  
(Marquez, "Light Is Like Water")

Marquez's image of torrents of golden flood of the lights is self-reflexive and playful. One of the realistic elements is the "[b]eautiful aluminum boat with a golden stripe at the waterline" that Toto and Joel's parents had promised to get them "[c]omplete with sextant and compass". Marquez goes on to say that they had gotten the rowboat into the apartment when they had "[i]nvited their classmates to help bring the boat up stairs". They used it to navigate "[a]t will among the islands of the house". When they "[b]roke the glowing bulb in one of the living room lamps. A jet of golden light as cool as water to pour out of the broken bulb". To achieve this effect, Marquez uses the characteristic of de-familiarization "radically emphasizing common elements of reality" (Simpkins 150) to allow the boys to row on top of the light. In the New York Times, Michiko Kakutani (1955) wrote: "Indeed, the reader is reminded by this book that the magical realism employed by Mr. Garcia Marquez... in part a narrative strategy for grappling with a social reality so hallucinatory, so irrational that it defies ordinary naturalistic description." Marquez emphasizes his poetic mood on theories to make impossible possible by using language that [i]s more powerful as an experience of things than experience of the things... dealing with the things that really count, then you deal with words (Gass, 1985). Marquez's unashamed expositions of human relations bring self-reflexivity and playfulness in his "Light Is Like Water". Self-reflexivity "does not necessarily come to terms with either order or disorder (Wilde, 1981: p.10). The title, "Light Is Like Water" itself is very problematic and playful, how light becomes water and 39 boys drowned in it is totally self-reflexive and playful. The following magical actions of the story are mentionable:

The following Wednesday, while their parents were watching The Battle of Algiers, people walking along the Paseo de la Castellana saw a cascade of light falling from an old building hidden among the trees. It spilled over the balconies, poured in torrents down the facade, and rushed along the great avenue in a golden flood that lit the city all the way to the Guadarrama.  
(Marquez, "Light Is Like Water")



Marquez's "Light Is Like Water" is a living excellence of how metaphors, similes and personifications are customized to smarten self-reflexivity, playfulness and simulacra. His stories are humorous and witty in many cases seeming to be very playful and self-reflexive when the image of a golden flood that "[s]pilled over the balconies, poured in torrents down the facade, and rushed along the great avenue" appears to readers. His self-consciousness proves how magical actions in the realistic setting bring additional strength to his writings. Magical action in the realistic setting is Marquez's self-conscious art "within the archive" (Foucault 1977: p.92) "of art itself is looking for" (Lyotard 1984: p.81) out of some sort of "intellectual disarray" (Lewis 1982: p.22).

Marquez's "Light Is Like Water" elicits a variety of responses of postmodernism among the writers in the world. Postmodernism is a generic name and umbrella term where Marquez's literary works convey a host of different theories and trends. He plays with the formal device and realism and everyday language is masterfully engineered as a vehicle in exercising imagination, narrative fragmentation, playfulness, self-reflexivity and magic realism in his "Light Is Like Water". He is a practitioner of writing Colombian history out of semantic chaos and linguistic jugglery. He may exist in the all postmodern literary realms of the world because several of his genres strive to seek the root of Latin American ethnicity in the special brand of Postmodernist writings.

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