
MAGICAL REALISM IN THE COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

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Summary: This paper considers to what extent contemporary discourses about magical realism might contribute to a comparative understanding of the works of Milorad Pavić, especially his novel *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Comparative analysis of elements of magical realism in Pavić's exemplary novel reveals characteristics of both European and Latin American forms of magical realism. Therefore, the paper places Pavić's novel into the context of magical realism.

Milorad Pavić is one of the best-known modern Serbian writers. He burst onto the international stage in 1984 with his novel *Dictionary of the Khazars*, which was translated into English and published in the United States in 1988. He became an important and widely read writer based on the great success of this novel. Since then, his books have been translated into thirty languages, and he has developed a significant literary reputation, particularly in Europe and Russia. In South Korea, only two of his novels have been translated and published: *Dictionary of the Khazars* in 1998 and a decade later the novel *The Inner Side of the Wind or a Novel of Hero and Leander*.

The novel *Dictionary of the Khazars* has 'male' and 'female' versions with two different endings, although the rest of the text is the same in the two versions. This gender organization of the narrative was developed by Pavić in the novel *The Inner Side of the Wind or a Novel of Hero and Leander* first published in the 1991. The novel has been translated into ten different languages and is based on the ancient classical tale of love of Hero and Leander. The book has two front pages and can be read from

both ends – Hero’s story from front to back as well as Leander’s story from back to front. The ending of both stories is in the middle of the book.

The dictionary format of *Dictionary of the Khazars* is possibly the most fully realized example of non-linear narrative, allowing the reader to begin virtually at any point in the novel and digress through the text. As a scholar and erudite, Pavić chose for the topic of his novel the lesser-known people of Khazars, who disappeared from the stage of history over a thousand years ago. He described the destiny of missing people using a number of historical references. The pagan ruler of Khazars is tempted to accept one of three religions: Christianity, Islam or Judaism. Therefore, the novel *Dictionary of the Khazars* is divided into three books: Red, with Christian sources, Green, with Islamic sources, and Yellow, with Jewish sources. Some lexicon entries, such as *Ateh*, are found in all three books, but given from different cultural and religious perspectives. The readers do not learn the story of the Khazars from Khazar sources, but from the later Christian, Jewish and Islamic sources. The narrator supposes that the religion selected by the Khazars is unknown. In this way, Pavić expresses doubts about the veracity of the so-called ‘finite historical truth’, and leaves open the possibility that all of the given answers may be accurate, or may be wrong.

All the characteristics of Pavić works are included in *Dictionary of the Khazars*, his exemplary work, the monumental ‘novel-lexicon of 100,000 words’, which can be interpreted from different perspectives. One of them is a political-historical point of view, which interprets the novel as an allegory of historical events. Pavić began his literary career in former Yugoslavia, which was a highly multinational and multicultural state. A few years after the publication of *Dictionary of the Khazars*, Yugoslavia broke apart in a bloody civil war. A number of critics read *Dictionary of the Khazars* as a sort of political allegory of the Yugoslavia disintegration, or in the national key terms, as the destiny of the small nations. For example, in the Slovenian magazine *Teleks*, one critic wrote, “If we, Slovenians, do not want to disappear as the Khazars did, it would be best for everyone to read *Dictionary of the Khazars*” (Popović, 1796).

Unlike in Europe, Russia and the United States, Pavić’s literary works have not yet achieved a wider response among readers in South Korea, and no serious critical reception of his work has been held. However, despite the absence of a larger response, Milorad Pavić is not a completely unknown writer in South Korea and has a small, but significant group of real fans and devotees in South Korea, among whom he enjoys a cult status. However, Korean readers, even those more familiar with Balkan history, completely bypass possible links of text meaning with the political and historical

context. The experience of reading *Dictionary of the Khazars* from a distant and different cultural perspective, such as Korean, shows that the reading of Pavić's novel as an allegory of historical events is far less important than other possible interpretations. In his books, Pavić displays great knowledge of literature, history and historical facts, but he plays with them in the postmodern way. By mixing documents, history and fiction, dream and nightmare, he creates a literary work that is compared in Korea with the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Gabriel García Márquez and the Latin American tradition of magical realism. The novels of García Márquez were published in Korea in the 1970s and 1980s and term *magical realism* appeared in the introductions to these translations. Korea's first novel of magical realism was *My Beautiful Ghost* (1999) by Choi Inseok. Beside this novel, other literary works in Korean literature have elements of magical realism.

Being unaware of the historical context and implications of daily politics, Korean readers perceive *Dictionary of the Khazars* as a work with strong elements of magical realism and as a simulacrum of history with postmodern acceptance of the relativity of historical truth. Such a reception of Pavić' work is familiar to critics and readers worldwide. For example, "Pavić's novels could be classified as magic realism... It's an experiment in flight, an attempt to defy the gravity of ordinary life", wrote Anne Tyler in *The Philadelphia Enquirer*.¹ Therefore, the more appropriate interpretation Pavić's novel *Dictionary of the Khazars* would be to use the theoretical potentiality of magical realism as a critical term and interpretative device. In this context, it is essential to compare Pavić's exemplary novel, *Dictionary of the Khazars*, with the works of European and especially Latin American magical realism².

¹ Cited from <http://www.khazars.com/en/reception>.

² In the book *Magic(al) Realism*, Bowers distinguishes 'magic' realism, 'magical' realism, and 'marvellous' realism. *Magic realism* is a term "introduced in 1925 referring to art that attempts to produce a clear depiction of reality that includes a presentation of the mysterious elements of everyday life" (126). In addition, *magical realism* is a term "introduced in the 1940s referring to narrative art that presents extraordinary occurrences as an ordinary part of everyday reality". *Marvellous realism* is a term "similar to magical realism but used in reference specifically to Latin American. It is translated from the Spanish term *lo realismo maravilloso* that was coined in Latin America in the 1940s to refer to narrative art that presents the mystical and magical elements as an integral part of everyday reality in Latin America" (127). For the purposes of our text, we use the term *magical realism* to summarize aspects of *magic realism* as primary European genre and *magical realism* and *marvellous realism*, as marks for the specific Latin American form of narrative fiction.

Magical realism became popular in the second half of the 20th century as a postmodern narrative mode, which relies on reader acceptance of the unrealistic elements of fiction, despite the experience of reality based on his habit of using language as a referential tool. The reader accepts the existence of the magical elements in the text on the same level of acceptance of realistic narration. In magical realism the extraordinary, magical happenings are presented as a part of ordinary reality, because the narration of the real and narration of the magical are within same narrative instance. The objects in magical realist texts represent not only themselves but also the potential for some kind of alternative reality. Magical realism is therefore related to realism in a way that it can extend “what is acceptable as real to its limits” (Bowers, 2005: 21).

Magical elements could be some mystery of existence, or some kinds of unusual occurrence that are inexplicable by scientific perception of reality: ghosts, disappearances, miracles, grotesque and demonic creatures, etc. For example, in García Márquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the birth of a child with a tail has been seen as a matter of everyday reality.³ In Pavić’s novel *Dictionary of the Khazars*, the birth of a child made of a mud (Petkutin) and his growth into a man who falls in love is accepted by the reader as a part of reality perception.

As Bowers points out, the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier revealed a difference between European and Latin American magical realist writing (Bowers, 2005: 33). Carpentier saw European magical realism as being unrelated to its cultural context of production. European magical realism is based on new forms of narrative techniques and experiments in literary forms, rather than beliefs, myths and cultural mixtures. The best-known magical realist novel in mainland Europe is *Die Blechtrommel (The Tin Drum, 1959)* written by the German novelist and Nobel Prize winner Günter Grass. European magical realism remains a form of fiction that is chosen for the purposes of literary experiment and does not have its source in the text’s mythological context. For instance, Italian writer Italo Calvino wrote a collection of short stories containing unusual events in a matter-of-fact, narrative way. In the magical trilogy (*The Cloven Viscount, 1951, The Baron in the Trees, 1957, and The Nonexistent Knight, 1959*) Calvino narrates magical elements that are imbedded with philosophical

³ As Wood observes, the magical element in fiction could be also a part of everyday reality. In 1988, the *British Medical Journal* reported just such a case not in Márquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* but in Manchester: “The surgeon who operated on the child to remove the addendum said, ‘It was a true tail, an extension of the coccyx, moved intermittently and was covered with fine downy hair.’ Unlike his counterpart in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the child suffered no ill effects, and when last heard of was a healthy five-year-old” (Wood: 60).

implications. In *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*), Baron Cosimo, at the age of twelve, rebelliously declares his intention to live his life in the trees. Calvino's work is often "categorized more simply as postmodern narrative and frequently as meta-fiction, due to the attention given in his narratives to the act of writing, reading and artistic creation" (Bowers, 2005: 61).

The 'play' with narrative techniques and experiments in literary forms is easily recognizable in *Dictionary of the Khazars* as the method of European magical realism. Every 'dictionary' entry could be read as a short story, and every story in the *Dictionary* has a matter-of-fact narrative style that includes extraordinary events. However, Pavić's literary work, especially his novel *Dictionary of the Khazars*, also shows the characteristics of the Latin American type of magical realism. Latin American magical realism is a form of fiction that relies on a distinctive, 'baroque' understanding of literature, which includes 1) a distinctive narrative style, and 2) a particular way of expression of multicultural and mythological context. Pavić's understanding of 'baroque' and his literary work, especially his *Dictionary of the Khazars*, show both characteristics of Latin American magical realism.

In the preface to the 1954 Edition of *A Universal History of Infamy* (*Historia universal de la infamia*) Borges defined baroque as the style "that deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its own possibilities" (Borges, 1984: 291). For him, "the baroque is intellectual" and he saw the baroque as "the final stage in all art, when art exhibits and squanders its resources" (Borges, 1984: 291). Borges is best known for his meta-fictional narratives that "challenge the reader's perception of what an author and a literary work are" (Bowers, 2005: 37); obviously, his magical realism writing was influenced by European literature. In his work *A Universal History of Infamy*, he gathers stories ascribed to other authors while "in fact he has created them himself" (Bowers, 2005: 37). Pavić uses a similar procedure in his novel *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Instead of collecting stories of different "authors", as Borges did, he collects different "sources" about the Khazar issue.

Baroque poetic principles are essential not only for Borges, but also for developing a Pavić understanding of literary work. He defines baroque as follows: "Baroque is an attempt to achieve impossible in all directions." (Pavić, 1986: 4). He also asserts that the stress in this definition is on "all directions" and wrote, "I have tried to get closer to the sculpture." (Pavić, 1986: 4). Pavić understands literary text not only as set of events in logical order, as Aristotle did, but also as sculpture or some other three-dimensional work of art, where it does not matter from which side you will

begin to observe work, so it is possible to study and watch work “from all sides” (Pavić, 1986: 4). This is the writer’s elaboration of his own literary technique of non-linear writing, which shows the influence of Lessing’s *Laookon* and Umberto Eco’s notion of “open text”.

The reader’s freedom in actualizing the potentiality of a text is a result of Lessing’s thought presented in *Laookon*. Lessing clarified that not only what the recipient reads or observes in a poem or work of art deserves to be understood, but also how the recipient reads and observes (collects) the signs that the poet or painter leaves to him (see: Allert, 2005: 107). Nevertheless, as the different receptions of Pavić’s work have already demonstrated, the reader freedom in the reading process is not limitless. Korean readers, for example, do not interpret *Dictionary of the Khazars* in the Balkan political and historical context. Therefore, the text is “open” only to a certain degree and the process of reading has some limitations. The reader has some freedom in the construction of the semiotic structure of the literary work, but this freedom remains limited by the text structure and meaning, and some pre-defined horizons of expectations, which are the specific historical, cultural and civilizational circumstances in which the reader interprets the text.

Pavić does not see baroque style only on a sentence level or in the experiments with the literary forms and modes of narration. He claims that realism is in crisis, and this is the reason why he uses baroque poetic principles in *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Pavić also wrote that the baroque, as a style formation, is present again: “If we look into Latin American contemporary fiction, we will see that on the level of a sentence this literature owes a lot to Spanish baroque. Comparisons with Cervantes are frequent and clear. So, if, given the present situation in Serbian literature, it is atypical for a modern writer to look deep into the works of the Baroque era, this is not so atypical on a global scale” (Pavić, 1986: 3). Baroque persevered in Latin America long after it had faded in Europe, which highlights certain characteristics of Pavić’s work, especially his *Dictionary of the Khazars*, which has characteristics of Latin American cross-cultural and mythological type of magical realism. These features and similarities are further revealed by comparative analysis of Pavić’s *Dictionary of the Khazars* and García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Published in 1967, Márquez’s novel, like *Dictionary of the Khazars* seventeen years later, was an immediate success, running to hundreds of editions, and being translated into 27 languages. There are three sources for García Márquez’s magical realism, especially in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: 1) “a confusion of time scales that suggests a mythic

time”; 2) “a mixture of superstition, gossip and exaggeration”; and 3) “the shock of the new” (Bowers, 2005: 38). The first two, but not the third, of these characteristics are also present in Pavić’s *Dictionary of the Khazars*.

The mythical time dimension of the hundred years of the novel's title is connected with the prophetic *Centuries* of Nostradamus, a famous prophet and 16th century astrologer and doctor. A hundred years is “a long time, a mythical time, an unimaginable time - like that of the sideshow announced by the second set of gypsies, in which a woman is to be decapitated every night for 150 years” (Wood, 1990: 47). Moreover, in Márquez’s novel the first type of magical realism involves characters whose life expectancy is considerably longer than a normal lifetime. In Pavić’s *Dictionary of the Khazars*, the same character lives, in various reincarnations, for many centuries. The paradigmatic example is the character of princess Ateh, who lives with different names from the 8th to 20th century.

There are three thematic and temporal levels in *Dictionary of the Khazars*: medieval, baroque (17th century) and modern (20th century). The medieval level is made of three versions of the Khazar polemic and princess Ateh primarily belongs to the medieval level; all three sources (Christian, Muslim, Jewish) emphasize her role in the Khazar debate. However, the characters from one time level reincarnate in another time level. For example, the 20th century meeting in the Kingston Hotel in Constantinople is a mythical reconstruction of researchers from the 17th century. Characters from the baroque level appear as characters in the 20th century level of the novel, but in different forms and under different names. For example, the waitress in the Kingston Hotel is Virginia Ateh, who claims to be Khazar. In fact, she is a mythical reincarnation of the princess Ateh, as may be concluded from her unusual abilities and from the correspondence of the princess Ateh’s magical key to a lock of the waitress’ room. The key is a magical entity because it disappeared from the princess’ mouth. Therefore, the key has the function of connecting remote times into one mythical time entity. This procedure is based on the repetition of mythical events and the resurrection of the soul in different bodies.

The second characteristic of Márquez’s type of Latin American magical realism is the combination of traditional and religious beliefs and tales so the world of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* becomes a place where beliefs and metaphors are perceived as “forms of fact” (Wood, 1990: 57). García Márquez, like Pavić, tells all the stories in a matter-of-fact narratorial tone and includes exact detail in the narrative. One of the many matter-of-fact magical moments of Márquez’s novel includes “the story of a priest who can levitate after drinking chocolate” (Bowers, 2005: 39). The

other magical element of this type is when a child is born with a pig's tail because of incest. In *Dictionary of the Khazars*, there are elements of magical realism as the mixture of superstition, gossip and traditional beliefs interacts with the narrator's poetic imagination and elements of Balkan and Slavic folklore. Pavić incorporates figures from popular Slavic traditions and mythology into the realm of his novel. While describing the devil, Pavić said he has no shadow, which is a traditional, folk element in describing the devil. In traditional beliefs, the devil can have two thumbs. One character from the baroque level in Pavić's novel, Lukarevich, is reincarnated as a boy in the modern level with two thumbs on one hand. In addition, Lukarevich gave birth to a little bearded old man with spurs on his bare feet. This tradition, full of mystical and grotesque creatures, is evoked in *Dictionary of the Khazars* as a world of magical realism.

As a result, Pavić's book has a perfectly rational, scientific order in the textual organization and the form of the dictionary entries. Nevertheless, *Dictionary of the Khazars* is full of unexpected combinations, constructed worlds, demonologies and mythologies that originate from the three different religions and cultures, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish, and from Slavic and Serbian folk traditions. The characters of the novel are spread through different periods, extending through medieval, baroque and modern times, at intervals of more than a millennium, conjuring up dreams, historical events and fiction. This combination of the formally perfect organized patterns of narrative entries, and freedom provided by entering the magical elements in the text narration, is the essential feature of this extraordinary literary work.

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