Magic(al) Realism in Postcolonial Novels
by Rushdie, Okri and Castillo

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents 1

Abstract 2

Introduction 3

Chapter One 10
Stories of India: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

Chapter Two 21
Tales without Borders: Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*

Chapter Three 32
Borderlands: Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*

Conclusion 43

Works Cited 49
Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the use of magic realism in postcolonial novels and specifically examines the function that new adaptations of traditional stories carry in these works. Although magic realism is often classified as either traditionally Latin-American or traditionally African, this thesis shows that magic realism is not limited to one literary tradition. By closely reading the re-written stories that are featured in the three novels, *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie (1981), *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri (1991), and *So Far from God* by Ana Castillo (1993), the many possibilities of this technique are presented. By creating new versions of traditional stories, the authors question concepts such as reality, truth and history, as well as the constructed authority of the Western worldview and belief system. Thus, the postcolonial writers use this technique, and the genre of magic realism, to criticize the dominant status the culture of the colonizer has retained in their postcolonial societies. Moreover, they criticize their countries’ current statuses, and through stories express how the conditions of such countries may be improved. Castillo also uses magic realism to question the patriarchy that is prevalent in the United States. Ultimately, this thesis shows how magic realist novels can use new versions of old stories to create equivalence between previously unequal concepts or subjects, which is inherent to the postcolonial practice of rethinking and restabilizing.
Introduction

Magic realism, like most literary genres, is difficult to define; countless literary texts have one or more of its characteristics, but there is no ‘pure’ magic realist text to refer to. The main idea of the literary genre is usually defined as the coexistence of magical and realistic elements in the same texts, in a way that does not give more importance or significance to one or the other. Not only is the genre notoriously difficult to define, there is a discussion about the term itself as well: some critics prefer the term ‘magic realism,’ whilst others define the genre as ‘magical realism.’ In this thesis, the term ‘magic realism’ will be used, because the term consists of two equal nouns. This represents the equal relationship between the magic and the real that is inherent to the genre. In this introductory chapter, some of the defining characteristics of magic realism will first be considered in order to further clarify what exactly is meant by the term.

Magic realism’s most important characteristic is the equivalence of the empirically real and the different reality of metaphor or magic. Magic realist stories usually take place in what seems to be the real world until events occur that, to a Western reader, seem impossible or at least highly improbable. The most important aspect about these events, as Sharon Sieber notes, is their “irreducible element: [they] are not explained by Western empirically based discourse” (172). The magical events retain the same significance as the empirically real events. Although this equality is not unique to magic realism, as Anne Hegerfeldt explains, magic realism distinguishes itself from other literary modes, like the fantastic, in that the magic and the real are equally likely, as opposed to equally unlikely (97). Thus, the inherently equal relationship between the magic and the real is what gives magic realism its unique status.
In order to establish this equal relationship, magic realist writers may use several different techniques to support and question both the magical and the rational worldview. One of the techniques that is used to support the magical worldview is to describe magical events in a realistic manner. Using features of the traditional realist mode, such as extensive description and matter-of-fact narration, magic realist writers appear to invoke realism, despite describing magical events. Not only does this make the magical events appear more realistic, it also lays bare how literary realism is always a construction, as Hegerfeldt asserts: “[because] deviation from a norm draws attention to the conventions on which that norm is based, magic realism functions to question realism’s claim to a transparent representation of reality” (72). With this technique, the magic realist writer simultaneously supports and undermines the realist representation of both magical and empirically real events in their novel. Hegerfeldt mentions two additional techniques that might be used in a magic realist text to achieve its purposes: firstly, the “fantastic rhetoric” (200), where techniques that are common in fantastic literature are used to describe empirically real elements, and secondly “a rhetoric of banality”, in which features of events from the extra-textual world are made to appear fantastic by describing them in the same seemingly realistic manner that is typically used in the genre to describe magical events (200). The techniques of magic realism mostly serve to juxtapose the magical and the real, portraying both as equally constructed, yet equally important.

Magic realism does not just challenge literary realism, but it challenges many other aspects of the Western worldview and traditions as well. The questioning of literary realism due to its constructedness can be extended to Western historiography and science. Both disciplines also rely on language and narrative to function and are therefore just as constructed as literary realism. The point, however, is not to argue that their constructedness makes their disciplines or the Western worldview invalid,
but merely to question the authority and importance the Western worldview has gathered. According to Hegerfeldt, this approach signals “that human beings are perfectly capable of holding a host of contradictory views simultaneously” (122). Magic realism argues that people, like the texts that belong to the genre, should be able to attribute equal value to both magical worldviews and rational worldviews, or at least not just adopt one worldview exclusively. In this way, magic realism takes away from the Western worldview its unchallenged status, and equals it with other views of the world.

With this re-evaluation of Western worldviews in mind, it is not surprising that magic realism is viewed as an important addition to the postcolonial discourse. Although the genre is of course not exclusively for writers from postcolonial backgrounds, it does seem to be the case that most magic realist writers have been (negatively) affected by the lingering effects of colonialism. Maggie Bowers refers to Stephen Slemon’s theory, who has pointed out three postcolonial elements that can be expressed especially through magic realist texts (97). Because of their dual nature, these texts can portray the point of view of the colonized peoples, as well as that of the colonizers. Moreover, the texts can show the suspension and the difficulties of living in between two cultural systems. Because magic realism questions Western historiography, it can also serve to tell the story of the subaltern or colonized, whose histories have been forgotten or deliberately hidden (as described by Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”). These three functions show how important magic realism can indeed be to the postcolonial discourse, and how they can be used in a postcolonial text to tell a story from a non-Western point of view.

Most of magic realism’s literary history originates from different postcolonial regions. Some critics consider magic realism to be a traditionally Latin-American phenomenon, whereas others argue it originates from the African storytelling
remarks. Remarkably enough, the arguments for why the mode is either Latin-American or African are strikingly similar. For example, David Danow argues that magic realism is characteristically Latin-American because “the geographical proximity of the jungle to the city elicits a related omnipresent sense of the closeness [...] of myth, or primordial thinking, to scientific thought” (71). The relatedness of magic and realism is inherent in Latin-American cultures, which is thus portrayed in the literary traditions as well. African written literature, as is pointed out by Ato Quayson, stems directly from the oral literary traditions, which is why “the dominant narrative genres that circulate have an element of the magical and the supernatural in them” (“Magical Realism” 159). As both literatures clearly have an element of magic in their traditions, it is difficult to determine where magic realism has truly originated. I will compare magic realist works from different areas of the world, following Quayson’s opinion that “the fertile productions from Latin-American, South Asia and Africa might be productively compared” (“Magical Realism” 161). Magic realism has been used in literature from many different cultures around the world, and due to its all-inclusive nature it does not seem fitting to attribute it to one literary tradition only.

I have chosen a novel from each of these three literary traditions to compare, which I will now briefly introduce. Indian novelist Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, published in 1981, is probably the most famous example of a magic realist novel, and has won many prizes, most notably The Best of the Booker in 2008. The story is narrated by its main character, Saleem Sinai, who tells the life stories of himself and his family members. The novel is well-known for its countless magical occurrences but its most significant feature is the allegorical quality of the novel: the storyline can be read as a symbol for India’s struggle towards and with independence. This symbolism is used by Rushdie to convey criticism on the nation and politics of
India, which can of course be traced back to British colonization of the region. Another novel that shows the effects of British colonization is *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri. This novel was published in 1991 and is a winner of the Man Booker Prize as well. It is praised by both Western and African critics and writers for its representation of the ‘African’ tradition and way of life. The novel follows a spirit child named Azaro in his life in what appears to be post-independence Nigeria. Azaro himself might be a symbol for Nigeria in a way similar to how Saleem is a symbol for India, which also functions as commentary on the state of Nigeria. It is especially through this magical main character and his interactions with other creatures of the spirit world that the magical occurs. Azaro’s spiritual quality is an example of how Okri heavily features traditional African stories in his work.

The novel I have chosen to represent the magic realist tradition from the Americas is Ana Castillo’s 1993 novel *So Far from God*. Ana Castillo is well-known as a Chicana writer and feminist, and has been widely appreciated for her work. As a Chicana novel, its status as ‘postcolonial’ differs from that of the other two novels. Although there is an identifiable history of colonialism, with North-America being perceived as colonizing and Mexicans as colonized, or Spain being the colonizer and the indigenous peoples the colonized, Chicano/as are essentially viewed as migrants (Pérez-Torres 29). Nevertheless, the magic realism in the novel appears to serve many of the same purposes. Rafael Pérez-Torres explains how the identity of Mexican-Americans corresponds with that of other postcolonial identities:

> In both cases, the hyphen separates and connects in a complex double-movement revealing “the difference within” identity. This notion of difference within highlights the contradictory position of all postcolonials whose identity arises from histories of oppression, exploitation, violence, erasure. Without negating the reality of these histories, postcolonials engage with their disempowered pasts, and reinvoke strategies of resistance, survival, and empowerment in that past. Their identities incorporate the other, become the other, transform the other. Chicano culture as one that occupies the
borderlands between and within Mexico and the United States manifests such an identity. (29)

Even though the background of Chicano/a culture differs from the background of other postcolonial identities, comparisons can be drawn between their experiences. Therefore, it is not surprising that the literature produced in these different cultures has certain similarities as well. In my analysis of the novel *So Far from God*, I demonstrate how Castillo also uses myths and stories of different origins, namely of indigenous, Mexican and Western tradition. The novel is about Sofia and her four daughters, who are left by the man of the house to fend for themselves. Castillo narrates the lives of the four sisters in the novel, using these myths and stories, to show how Chicana women are negatively influenced by the society they are (or, perhaps, are not) a part of. By comparing the three novels, all from vastly different traditions, I am able to show how magic realism functions in many different postcolonial contexts.

What all three cultures have in common is the importance of storytelling, because of which stories have great significance and play an important role in transferring knowledge. This emphasizes how the stories of the novels themselves and the stories within are not merely stories either. Rather, they also convey knowledge, but more specifically an alternative way of perceiving both the events that occur in the world and the world itself as well. This is of course especially useful in the postcolonial context in which these novels are written, as it both undermines the authority of the Western worldview and creates space for different ways of looking at the world. By invoking different traditions, and by valuing magic and realism equally, these novelists acknowledge both their indigenous and Western influences, without privileging either. The manner in which they do so, by telling and adapting traditional stories, is what I have chosen as this thesis' topic. By closely reading these stories and
analyzing their significance, I examine the function of this technique. Moreover, I use magic realist theory to place this technique into a magic realist context, both because the novels can all be classified as such, and because the effects of this specific way of storytelling serve the purpose that magic realism is said to have. It is also important to consider the novels’ historical contexts, as all novels express criticism on a specific society at a specific time in history. By employing these different approaches, I show how magic realist writers from different parts of the world use the re-telling and adaptation of traditional stories in order to comment on the state of the postcolonial societies in by which they have been influenced.
Chapter One

Stories of India: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

As was mentioned in the introduction, there is a disjunction in Western historiography: although in the Western worldview narratives are usually seen as fictional, history, which is mostly told with the use of narratives, is perceived as relatively objective and factual. Magic realism that is concerned with history can serve to uncover this discrepancy. As Jenni Adams points out, magic realism can function as “fiction which problematizes historical forms and contents through a double movement in which the authority of these contexts is both established and undermined” (21-22). By posing a similar, yet alternative story of the history of the Indian nation, Rushdie simultaneously affirms and questions the story as it is presented in the history books. This kind of use of metaphor or allegory is typical for magic realist novels, as Hegerfeldt affirms: “magic realist texts retain a distinctly metaphorical or allegorical quality” (58). Aside from this, Rushdie’s main character, Saleem, also writes himself into other highly influential stories, especially those of several different religions. Through this technique, Rushdie questions the authority and the uncontested importance of these different stories. I will show how this technique comes forward in the novel, what criticism it expresses, and how this links in with the magic realist tradition in which the novel is placed.

Metaphor is often used in magic realist fiction, but *Midnight’s Children* takes this technique much further: the story, in its entirety, can be read as an allegory of the history of India. The story revolves around Saleem Sinai, who believes that because he was born on the stroke of midnight of August 15th, 1947, which is exactly when India gained independence, his story and that of India are inextricably linked. Thus, Saleem believes that events in his life, whether or not caused by Saleem himself, are
always mirrored by events in the nation of India. Although this strikes one as a bizarre and self-inflated idea, in the novel it becomes increasingly likely, as the coinciding histories of Saleem and India unfold. Saleem receives a letter from the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, which reads:

My belated congratulations of the happy accident of your birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own. (Rushdie 167)

The fact that even the Prime Minister suggests there is a link between Saleem’s birth and the independence of India makes Saleem’s idea seem less questionable. However there is one problem with this link, or ‘mirror’ as the Prime Minister calls it, which is pointed out by Neil Ten Kortenaar: “how can we judge which is reflecting and which is reflected?” (32). In the magic realist mode, one is never sure which of the two (or more) explanations for a magical occurrence is the true explanation. Thus, it is never clear if Saleem’s life truly affects India, or vice versa, or if there is no real link between the two histories. Nevertheless, Saleem’s (hi)story might provide us with information about India’s (hi)story. More important to my purpose, Rushdie uses the rewriting of India’s history to critique the nation’s current status.

Saleem starts his life story by retelling the lives of his grandparents, which, because of their supposed mirroring, could be interpreted as a description of India’s cultural background. Because Saleem’s story is assumed to be linked to the history of India, analyzing the stories and the characteristics of these two grandparents provides insight into India’s pre-Independence history. Saleem’s grandfather, Aadam Aziz, is technically not even Indian: he was born in Kashmir, which was a British princely state at the time. During his studies, he spent a few years in Germany, where he was introduced to the Western view on reality, which conflicted with his own. These conflicting worldviews cause him to abandon his religion: “He was caught in a
strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief. [...] [He] was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve” (Rushdie 7). Aadam Aziz’ doubt shows how the Western influence has irreversibly changed something in India: it brought scientific and political knowledge, but it has taken away from religion its unchallenged status, which is represented in Aadam Aziz by a permanent hole inside of him. Thus, one important part of India’s history is the Western influence that has irreversibly changed, and arguably left a hole, in the current Indian nation.

The hole that is left by religion’s loss of influence cannot remain empty for long, as Aadam-as-India seems to be keen to fill it with another belief. Although his position in the middle does not influence his life immediately, its significance becomes clearer when Aadam meets his wife-to-be Naseem Ghani. She becomes a patient of Doctor Aadam Aziz, and because of her strict religious background she cannot show her body to him without losing honor. He must examine her through a perforated sheet, only being allowed to see the part of her body that requires treatment. Aadam cures illness after illness:

Far away the Great War moved from crisis to crisis, while in the cobwebbed house Doctor Aziz was also engaged in a total war against his sectioned patient’s inexhaustible complaints. [...] So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts. (Rushdie 26)

He falls in love with the image he has created of her, which, ironically through a hole, fills the hole that was left by religion. Aadam’s eagerness provides problems, as MacFenwick presents: “The root cause of Aadam’s conceptual error is [...] his all-too-willing interpretation of Naseem as Bharat Mata – as the necessary, metaphorical link to his “homeland” (52). Naseem represents ‘Mother India’, but Aadam fails to recognize that her fragmented status and the medical conditions that affect her many
fragments are forebodings. The love for and belief in a ‘Mother India’, which in reality is a fragmented and diseased whole, is also a part of India’s foundation.

Saleem raises no doubt about Aadam and Naseem being his grandparents, so the fundamental background of India is not doubted either, but his parents are more difficult to identify. His mother, he claims, is Mumtaz Aziz, the most dark-skinned of the Aziz children, whose darker shade indicated her link with other Indians, as opposed to the lighter-skinned, often blue-eyed Kashmiris. Her first marriage, with politically-involved Nadir Khan, is ended by her parents because the marriage is not consumed. After this, she marries Ahmed Sinai and is renamed Amina, but this marriage proves to be a challenge as she is still in love with Nadir. She resolves to learn to love Ahmed: “[each] day she selected one fragment of Ahmed Sinai, and concentrated her entire being upon it until it became wholly familiar; until she felt fondness rising up within her and becoming affection and finally, love” (Rushdie 87). She also makes some changes: “Ahmed, without knowing or suspecting, found himself and his life worked upon by his wife until, little by little, he came to resemble – and to live in a place that resembled – a man that he had never known and an underground chamber he had never seen” (Rushdie 88). This, already, makes Saleem’s parental situation complicated: his mother represents the situation of the lower-class Indian through her skin-color, her love for politics in her love for Nadir and her willpower in pretending to be happy in her current situation; whereas his father represents an India that fails to suffice and is unaware of the changes that are being made within it. The analysis of the parents who raised Saleem already shows a multiplicity of influences in his early childhood which influence him in his later life, but soon it becomes clear that Saleem has many more parental figures by whom he is influenced.
The fact that, as it turns out, Saleem is a changeling is what makes his historical background truly difficult to trace. Mary Pereira, who at the time works as a midwife in Dr Narlikar’s clinic, where Saleem is born, decided to switch the two children that were born at midnight on August 15th. This means that it is not Ahmed and Amina who are Saleem’s parents, but the poor Vanita, who passed away immediately after delivering her baby, and William Methwold, descendant of the British ‘discoverer’ of Bombay, with whom Vanita cheated on her husband Wee Willie Winkie, who is a poor entertainer at Methwold’s Estate. This revelation adds a large number of people to Saleem’s possible parental figures. Saleem himself explains that the event had little effect: “when we eventually discovered the crime of Mary Pereira, we all found that it made no difference! I was still their son: they remained my parents. In a kind of collective failure of imagination, we learned that we simply could not think our way out of our pasts” (Rushdie 158, emphasis in original). It is remarkable that, in a state of mind where myths and dreams are still highly influential, here the Sinais collectively fail to imagine. The event does have a considerable effect on Saleem as a representation of India, as Keith Wilson demonstrates:

His various father figures – Methwold, Wee Willie Winkie, Nadir Khan, Ahmed Sinai – and his changeling assumption of a family history to which he has no claim makes him an identity-defying compound of Moslem, Hindu and British, with a mythological frame of reference that draws on all the components of an Indian melting-pot. (28-29)

Because Saleem has so many father and mother figures, his identity is not clearly demarcated: he can assume all kinds of positions, based on the identities of all his different possible parents. This seems to be a blessing, but it is a curse as well: his fragmentation and cracked state seem to be caused by his mixed identity, too. As his background is unusually mixed and because he has so many different roots, he can
be, as Wilson points out, the perfect representation of the multi-faceted Indian society. His representation of India, because of their similarly mixed backgrounds, seems to indicate that the nation of India has many different father and mother figures as well, which feeds its rich and diverse background, but also explains its inherent dividedness.

As a result of his assumed link to India’s history, Saleem is overambitious as a child, which brings him to an important realization. At several points on the novel, Saleem acts overconfident and gets hurt because of it. The most telling occasion is when baby Saleem manages to stand up for the first time:

I was grabbing the bars of my cot, [...] I was heaving red-faced around gravity, [...] I, Baby Saleem, aged exactly one year, two weeks and one day, hauled myself upright in my cot. [...] I grew up with legs that were irretrievably bowed, because I had got to my feet too early (Rushdie 204-205).

It seems that Saleem, through his overconfidence, grows up too fast, and what can be derived from this is that India might have grown up too fast as a nation as well. Other instances are when Saleem stands up for a classmate and gets a clamp of hair pulled about by his teacher because of it (Rushdie 322), and when he attempts to defend himself against his bullies, after which he loses the tip of his middle finger (Rushdie 325). Fenwick explains that, after his injuries, “Saleem beings to move away from his rather simplistic view of metaphorical equivalence [...] toward a more nuanced understanding of the manner in which metaphor is motivated by both equivalence and contiguity”(57). With this realization, Rushdie makes sure to undermine the supposed truth the metaphor of Saleem-as-India seemed to express as well, the effects of which are described by Todd Giles: Rushdie now cannot be held accountable, as he makes the reader aware that he is not intending to faithfully represent India’s history through allegory, and he ensures that he is not making the same claims to absolute truth that magic realism criticizes (184). Saleem’s injuries
and his subsequent realization not only have consequences within the novel, but also affect the reading of the novel in general: although the metaphor of Saleem as India has an important function within the novel, it is not all-encompassing.

The destruction of the coexistence of different worldviews is signified in the novel by Indira Gandhi, and her destructive effects on Saleem-as-India and the other magical midnight’s children show how Rushdie considers her to be a cause of India’s problems. As Prime Minister of India, she has a great effect on Saleem’s life. Saleem fears they are competing for the position of mirror of India, because of her slogan “India is Indira and Indira is India” (Rushdie 587). She also competes with the other remaining midnight’s children, who all have their own magical abilities due to their time of birth. She wants to rewrite a myth of her own:

But what I learned from the Widow’s Hand is that those who would be gods fear no one so much as other potential deities; and that, that and that only, is why we, the magical children of midnight, were hated feared destroyed by the Widow, who was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be Devi, the Mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the shakti of the gods, a multi-limbed divinity with a centre-parting and schizophrenic hair. (Rushdie 162)

Indira Gandhi does not support the idea of a society in which several worldviews or beliefs could coexist: she wants Hinduism to be the religion of the nation, and wants herself to be the Mother Goddess, the one without whom the other gods do not have meaning or function. Luis Parreiras-Horta points out that Rushdie, “by presenting Indira’s authoritarian and chauvinistic Hindu mysticism as the only option to the secularist ethic of Nehru” (17) argues for secularism in India. He shows how destructive it might be for the country to have only one religion, only one ‘Goddess’. Thus, Rushdie expresses the need for secularist politics in India, which is especially necessary due to the many different religions that are practiced in the country. He shows here the dangers of forcing the adoption of only one worldview, as Gandhi
attempts to do, as it quite literally kills other (magical) worldviews and has merely negative influences.

Indira Gandhi eventually gains victory over the magical characters which, too, reveals something of Rushdie’s attitude towards her. The Widow, as Saleem refers to her, manages to imprison all of the remaining midnight’s children (except for Shiva, who is already on her side), and Saleem describes what happens to them after being arrested:

Test- and hysterectomized, the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves...but that was only a side-effect, because they were truly extraordinary doctors, and they drained us of more than that: hope, too was excised. [...] Drainage below: it was not a reversible operation. Who were we? Broken promises; made to be broken. And now I must tell you about the smell. [...] What Saleem smelled in the evening of January 18th, 1977: [...] the pungent inescapable fumes of what-had-been-excised, cooking over a low, slow fire. (Rushdie 613-614)

Indira ensures that the midnight’s children will not be able to reproduce, will not be able to use or spread their magical abilities ever again. This passage also reveals the imperfections of the metaphor India-Saleem: although on the 18th of January, 1977, Gandhi called for new elections, intending to win, she lost the elections, thus it would be most likely her who loses hope, rather than the midnight’s children. James Harrison explains that some critics call this event into question due to all the inconsistencies in the novel, and he asks: “Yet even if we accept that Saleem’s castration is all in his mind – a mere extension of the “Saleem-equals-India metaphor” – does this imply that the Widow did not castrate India, or that Rushdie has no political point to make?” (54). Harrison has already answered his own question before: “It seems [Rushdie] would have the widow say, so much for all those liberated energies associated with independence and symbolized by midnight’s children” (47). Regardless of the imperfections of the allegory, it follows from this
passage that Rushdie holds Indira Gandhi responsible for the killing of the hopes and dreams of the Indian nation. He uses the magic realist characters, whose ‘magic’ is taken away by Gandhi, to signify how her authoritarian rule over the country is what Rushdie considers to be the death blow of the nation.

The history of the nation of India is not the only story that is rewritten in order to place Saleem at its center. Saleem could be interpreted as a Jesus figure, and what is especially important in justifying this interpretation are the names of his ayah, Mary Pereira, and her sweetheart Joseph D’Costa. Of course, the pairing of Mary and Joseph already signals towards a biblical reference, and the fact that Mary is the one who switched Saleem and Shiva in order to impress Joseph, makes her one of Saleem’s mother figures, without actually losing her virginal status. Ten Kortenaar points towards another possible biblical reference: “Mary’s name associates her not only with the virginal mother of Christ, but also with Miriam, the sister of Moses, responsible for arranging the switch that saw her brother adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh and raised as an Egyptian prince” (210). Thus, Saleem’s changeling status can also be explained biblically. Both of these stories are also told in the Quran, with the difference that Mary and Miriam are indeed already the same person in the Quran. On the one hand, Saleem being centered in stories of Christian and Islamic religions works to undermine the sacred status of these texts, as they are used in the same constructed, parodic manner that is constant in the novel. On the other hand, the fact that Saleem and Shiva have been switched raised questions about Saleem’s important status within the novel: it might as well be Shiva that is the savior of the people. The biblical references are used to further affirm the magic realist status of the novel: by referring to them, Rushdie acknowledges the importance of the texts for India, yet undermines their status simultaneously.
Saleem’s family is also written into Hindu mythology, which supports the earlier statement that Saleem comes from several different backgrounds: he is fitted into stories of all of the three big religions in India. His family is likened to the Hindu God Ganesh through three characters. Aadam Aziz is described as having a large nose, “comparable only to the trunk of the elephant-headed god Ganesh” (Rushdie 9). Saleem himself also has a remarkably big nose. Aside from this, the duality between him and Shiva can be likened to that between Ganesh and Skanda, as Ten Kortenaar demonstrates (209). Skanda is exiled from his mother, as is Shiva, which allows him to grow independent and potent. Saleem-as-Ganesh, however, enjoys undivided attention from his mother but is left with impotence. Nevertheless, Aadam Sinai, the one who Saleem claims to be his son, but who is, like in Hindu mythology, actually the son of Parvati and Shiva, looks like Ganesh as well:

He was the true great-grandson of his great-grandfather, but elephantiasis attacked him in the ears instead of the nose – because he was also the true son of Shiva-and-Parvati; he was elephant-headed Ganesh. (Rushdie 587)

In this way, the members of Saleem’s family, not all connected by blood, are connected, with the rebirth of Ganesh in all these characters expressing Hindu beliefs. And, more importantly, Saleem is connected to yet another religion that is practiced in India. Rushdie has managed to create a figure that is able to represent all of these religions, which is also what he wishes India as a nation would do.

By re-writing the (hi)story of the Indian nation, alongside stories from the Bible, the Quran, and Hindu mythology, Rushdie uses magic realist techniques to express criticism on the state of India. The metaphor of Saleem-as-India expresses his opinions on the nation of India. He shows how India is made up of people from many very different backgrounds, which is responsible both for the richness of its culture and history, as well as for the dividedness of the country. In order to cope
with all these different cultures living within the nation, one would have to accept different worldviews coexisting at once. By claiming authority, Indira Gandhi appears to have ruined the possibilities that the nation had, by attempting to make it uniform. It becomes clear that Rushdie considers secularism to be very important for the state (which he has also expressed in interviews, see Parreiras-Horta 13). Aside from the political criticism he expresses, Rushdie’s novel creates equivalence between the big religions, referring to all of them in a tongue-in-cheek manner, which ensures that no one of them gains importance over the others. And, as Fenwick puts it:

Rushdie’s novel not only dramatizes but comes to depend upon the necessary interdependence of metaphor and metonymy, equivalence and contiguity – similarity and difference – in its representation of a total experience that does not seek to render that experience according to some kind of artificial – and violent – form of totalitarian representation (65).

The novel is based on metaphorical meaning: the allegory of Saleem-as-India is what the novel revolves around. Nevertheless, Rushdie makes sure to also destabilize that form of knowledge, to refrain from claiming authority for metaphorical meaning. Rushdie’s novel, above all, questions everything in order to make sure nothing gains total authority, and nothing is deemed more important than anything else. The magic realist adaptation of traditional (hi)stories is used in Midnight’s Children to criticize any claim of total authority or absolute truth.
Chapter Two

Tales without Borders: Ben Okri’s The Famished Road

Like Rushdie does in Midnight’s Children, Okri uses metaphors in order to rewrite and reinterpret stories of local, religious and Western traditions as a means of expressing his ideas. Moreover, as Christine Lanone points out, Okri’s novel also takes place during the beginning of independence of his country of origin, Nigeria, in the 1960s (57). Because of this choice of circumstances, Okri is also able to use his novel to comment on the birth and coming-of-age of this nation. As will be shown, Okri is not as explicit in his commentary as Rushdie is, since he does not address the issues head-on. Rather, he relies on storytelling to express his opinions. This is in accordance with his African background, since it is a traditionally African phenomenon for stories to have a great significance and often function as a piece of advice. Vincent Obobolo affirms this, when he describes the response of older characters when the main character, Azaro, asks them to tell him a story: “the elders have often responded in the true African way of [...] telling a story laden with wisdom and lessons for the youth” (52). Clearly, a novel that is written within the African tradition cannot be assumed to be ‘only a story.’ In this chapter, it will be shown what wisdom and lessons Okri passes on to his readers with the use of magic realism.

The stories that Obobolo describes are used to unmask some historical narratives and reverse them, through which Okri undermines the authority of the Western point of view concerning colonialism. Azaro, the main character of the novel, thus often asks elders to tell them stories, and in this case he asks his mother to tell him a story about white people, which she does:

‘When white people first came to our land,’ she said, as if she were talking to the wind, ‘we had already gone to the moon and all the great stars. In the olden days they used to come and learn from us.'
My father used to tell me that we taught them how to count. We taught them about the stars. We gave them some of our gods. We shared our knowledge with them. We welcomed them. But they forgot all this. They forgot many things. They forgot that we were all brothers and sisters and that black people are the ancestors of the human race. The second time they came they brought guns. They took our lands, burned our gods, and they carried away many of our people to become slaves across the sea. [...] They are not all bad. Learn from them, but love the world.’ (Okri 325)

This story reverses the colonial history as it is told from the Western perspective, in which colonialism was justified by the idea of ‘the white man’s burden’, with which it was suggested that colonialism was beneficial for both the colonized and the colonizer, as the colonies became educated and developed countries. In this story, however, Mum presents a different (hi)story, in which white people first took from the African cultures and knowledge what they needed, and then came back to destroy it all. The binary opposition is not merely reversed, however, as Margaret Cezair-Thompson shows: “Azaro’s mother then replaces her narrative of colonial violence and betrayal with a narrative of self-renewal. [...] Thus colonial history is retold as part of a larger, timeless, indigenous discourse which acknowledges but does not stagger under the weight of Europe’s colonization of Africa” (43). Mum ends her story with the idea that “Justice will rule the world” (Okri 325). Her story acknowledges the economic successes that the whites have gained in the colonial period, but her final thoughts provide the footnote that this is merely a temporal success, as it is justice that should be truly sought after. To use the terms of Cezair-Thompson, Okri refrains from the angry, displacing mood that some postcolonial literature expresses, and instead “presents the regenerative forces of replacement” (34). Okri rewrites the story of colonialism not merely to reverse the Western version of this (hi)story, but also to signal that justice is the true objective.

Magic realism comes forward in the novel especially through the main character, Azaro, whose story is a rewritten version of the traditional *abiku* myth.
Being an *abiku*, Azaro is a seemingly human creature who is always in-between the empirical world and the spiritual world. Belief in the *abiku* is strong in the Yoruban traditions, but it occurs in Igbo mythology as well, though under a different name, namely *ogbanje*. *Abikus* originate from the spirit world, and are born into the earthly world time and time again, most often to the same mother. Throughout their life on earth, they remain strongly connected to the other spirit children, and desire to go back to the spirit world, which, according to David Lim, they often do on an agreed date (63). In the traditional myth, *abikus* are feared by their parents, as they bring misfortune and create havoc during their lifetimes, only to exit the earthly world after. Okri represents a different kind of *abiku*, which Azaro explains in the following passage:

> But this time, somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the living, I chose to stay. This meant breaking my pact and outwitting my companions. [...] It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to forever remain in-between. It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have that sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. (Okri 6)

Instead of wanting to return to the spirit world and enjoying the grief he causes, like the mischievous spirit child in African mythology would do, Azaro breaks the promises he made to his spirit kin, in order to continue his life on earth and make his mother-to-be happy. Quayson’s elaboration of this choice shows how this expresses the magic realist mood: “because Azaro desires to stay in the real world while at the same time refusing to break links with that of his spirit companions, both the real world and that of spirits are rendered problematically equivalent in his experience. Since the narration is in the first person with all events being focalized through the consciousness of Azaro, the universe of action is located simultaneously within both
the real world and that of spirits” (Strategic Transformations 24). Much like magic realist literature creates an equivalence between magic and the real, Azaro’s spirit child experience remains forever in-between the magic and the real as well.

Azaro remains in-between, and interpreting this as a metaphor reveals Okri’s experience and vision, and can be read as an expression of the experience of the postcolonial subject. Okri is himself a writer of Nigerian descent, but has also lived in London in his youth, and has attended the University of Essex. In this sense, he is like the postcolonial subject that José Vázquez describes, who “has been forced to stand in between two cultures: his own native civilization and the European traditions” (87). Because of his Nigerian origins, most critics immediately label his literature as ‘postcolonial’, whereas others criticize him for not being able to represent Nigeria properly due to his Western education. Perhaps, Okri is like Azaro, who cannot completely let go of either his earthly family or his spirit kin, in that he can neither separate himself from his origins nor his education. Azaro expresses his attitude towards his status as such: “It is terrible to remain forever in-between” (Okri 6).

Obobolo also considers Azaro to be a metaphor for the postcolonial man in general: “He does not feel a sense of belonging in the new, mysterious and foreign world into which he has been born neither does he possess a strong, resolute and firm determination to return to the blissful land of beginnings” (57-58). Like Azaro not being able to go back to the spirit world because something has shifted within him, the postcolonial subject and his country have been changed too much for the subject to go back to his origins, but neither does he fit into the new state of his country. The in-between state of Azaro as an abiku who wants to stay in the earthly world stands for the double identity of the postcolonial subject.

In The Famished Road, Okri uses magic realism to express criticism on Nigeria’s state as a new nation. Like Rushdie uses Saleem as a magical metaphor for
India, the *abiku* myth can be interpreted as a magical metaphor for the country of Nigeria. Okri makes this metaphor just as explicit as Rushdie does, as several characters in the novel liken the country to a spirit child. However, Okri is not suggesting that Nigeria is like the *abiku* of the traditional myth, as critics like Emaka Ikechi have suggested (249), in that it will never become a mature nation. When Azaro’s Dad explains to him how he views Nigeria, this becomes clear: “Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong. I won’t see it” (Okri 547). Nigeria may be like a traditional *abiku* now, not being able to or willing to remain in the same lifetime for long, but according to Dad, some day Nigeria will be like Azaro, determined to stay. Quayson states: “When Okri suggests this, [...] it is not to postulate an ineluctable determinism, but rather to suggest that his country has not done enough to transcend the trauma of unending underdevelopment or the nausea of confusion in its unfocused attempts to escape it” (*Strategic Transformations* 132). Thus, what Okri seems to say is that Nigeria is not ready to become a mature nation yet, but he does see the possibility of this happening in the future. He uses the rewritten myth of the magical *abiku* not only to express criticism on the nation, but also to suggest its possibilities.

The magic realist technique of rewriting stories is also applied to other *abikus* in the novel, who shows how politics and greed are the factors that hold the nation back. Madame Koto is an important character in the novel. In the beginning of the story, she is portrayed as a strong and independent bar owner, and a medicine woman, who is able to fight men in a way that is reminiscent of a mythical heroine. During the course of the story, however, she becomes more involved in corruption, because politicians use her bar as a meeting place. Madame Koto suddenly grows quickly, in accordance with her growing wealth and greed. She turns out to be
pregnant, but her ‘monstrous pregnancy’ never comes to a birth. Lanone points out that this is because she is “pregnant with three abiku children, the emblem of an abiku nation which cannot be properly born through Independence, and which unites the energy of its triple ethnic roots, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa” (59-60). The three major ethnic groups are spirit children themselves, who should deserve their own chance of being born into this world. However, like Madame Koto, whose influence and wealth grow at the cost of her abiku children, the politicians of Nigeria grow at the cost of these ethnic groups. Here, Okri has adapted the abiku myth again, this time involving spirit children who cannot be born at all, using magic realism to signal how the greed and corruption of politics are destructive for the people of Nigeria.

Magic realism is also used in the passages about the photographer, who becomes part of a biblical story in order to unveil the importance of the media and the difficulties they encounter in such supposedly democratic nations. The photographer starts taking pictures of wrong-doings committed by the politicians, and for that he is arrested. As soon as he returns, he informs the villagers:

When he arrived the street gathered outside his room to give him a hero’s welcome. He told us stories of his imprisonment and how he had survived fiendish methods of torture inflicted on him to get out the names of collaborators, planners of riots, destabilisers of the Imperial Government, and enemies of the party. (Okri 183)

The photographer’s experiences show how media that is critical of the government is silenced, in this case even with the use of physical force, by those in power. The photographer turns into a figure of mythical, or heroic, proportions because he continues his documentation in spite of the risks. Brenda Cooper points out the significance of the photographer’s name, Jeremiah, which is easy to connect: Jeremiah is the Jewish prophet who warned his people against immoral acts (“Snapshots” 146). Cooper also shows that the photographer is not only a twentieth-century representation of this prophet, but he also becomes the hero of his own story:
“Less man than god, the photographer’s gaze is fixed on national questions affecting Nigeria’s post-independence future” (“Snapshots” 148). The photographer uses his job as a way of unveiling what is wrong in the nation post-independence, and because he risks his own safety in the process, he achieves his God-like status. In his mythical representation of the photographer, Okri uses magic realism to praise the independent media for uncovering truths, and simultaneously criticizes these quasi-democratic nations for attempting to conceal them.

The abiku myth is used as well to break down binary oppositions, which is also one of the purposes of magic realist literature in general. The abiku Ade is used to point out to readers who are not familiar with the Yoruban myths how Azaro is different from traditional abikus:

> Spirit children do not care much for the limited things of the world. Ade did not want to stay any more, he did not like the weight of the world, the terror of the earth’s time. Love and the anguish of parents touched him only faintly, for beyond their stares and threats and beatings he knew that his parents’ guardianship was temporary. He always had a greater home. I never knew how different we both were till that morning. (Okri 556-557)

For readers who are not familiar with the concept of the spirit child, Azaro’s distancing from Ade points them towards his difference. Ade, with his desire to leave the earthly world again, is a tradition abiku, and Azaro’s explanation emphasizes how Okri has changed the myth, which makes Azaro’s metaphoric significance as a symbol for Nigeria greater. However, Ade himself is also clearly moved away from the traditional abiku myths. When Azaro witness Ade’s dreams, he discovers details about Ade’s past lives:

> I saw that he had not told me the whole truth. I saw his other images. I saw a murderer in Rome, a poetess in Spain, a falconer among the Aztecs, a whore in Sudan, a priestess in old Kenya, a one-eyes white ship captain who believed in God and wrote beautiful hymns and who made his fortune capturing slaves in the Gold Coast. I even saw a famed samurai warrior in ancient Japan, and a mother of ten in Greece. (Okri 551)
What Okri suggests here is that the *abiku* is not merely a Nigerian or African phenomenon. Ade, as a spirit child, has been born into different parts of the world, in very different temporal spaces, with different genders and different ages. Quayson points out that this means that “clearly, the abiku concept is partially filiated to conceptions of the afterlife not wholly African” (*Strategic Transformations* 137). This idea has the effect that it further emphasizes the breaking-down of binary oppositions which is characteristic for magic realism: there are no myths that are solely available to Africans, nor are there myths that are exclusively European. Ade’s past lives reveal that the spirit world is boundless and thus transcends national and temporal borders.

This transcending of borders is a crucial aspect of *The Famished Road*, and is characteristic for magic realism as a genre as well. Although it seems obvious that the novel is about Nigeria as there are many references from Nigerian cultures and to Nigerian history around the time of its independence, it is important to note that Okri does not ever mention ‘Nigeria’ specifically. One possible reason for this is that the nation of Nigeria has borders that were constructed as a consequence of colonialism, and Okri has chosen not to acknowledge them in the novel. However, it seems more likely that Okri is emphasizing that his nation’s condition does not end at its borders. Lim also warns the Wester reader that they should take this limitlessness as a sign that they themselves are also involved in this story. Whereas Rushdie’s novel refers mostly to Indian affairs, Okri’s boundlessness aims to remind every reader of ‘their’ part in this story, which makes the struggle everyone’s concern. If these are indeed everybody’s problems, then everybody is also responsible for the solution.

The famished road of the title aims to achieve international connectedness as well, both as a means of transportation, but also as an intertwine of Western technology and African beliefs. The road is introduced in a biblical manner: “In the beginning there was a river” (Okri 3). This first invokes Western traditions, which is
continued by the road becoming a representation of Western technology. However, it is not merely a Western symbol, as the road is also included into the myths that are prevalent in the novel. Azaro and his father observe people building a road, and although it does not become clear whether this is physical or symbolic building, Dad’s stories about the road are significant:

‘The road is their soul, the soul of their history. That is why, when they have built a long section if it, or forgotten the words of their prophet and begun to think they have completed it [...], the road goes mad and twists and destroys itself, or the people become distorted in spirit and start to turn the road into other things or the workers go insane, the people start wars, revolts cripple everything and a thousand things distract them and wreck what they have built and a new generation comes along and begins again with the wreckage.’ (Okri 378-379)

The road is not only a representation of the influences of Western technology in the sense that it spoils the African myths. Although the representation of politics in the novel shows how greed has become universal as it is now also a feature of African life, the road is a symbol of how cyclical progress is not merely African either and is not necessarily bad. Cooper identifies the road of this myth as “the road of life”, “a road that embraces change and embodies not warnings but their opposite – injunctions to explore and to grow” (Magical Realism 79). The road is a mythical symbol for both the Western and African cultures, a road towards progress which, unbeknownst to the road-builders, is not linear but cyclical. Thus, it is used to undermine the Western idea of linear progress, and therefore shows that it is illusive to think that one culture has progressed more than others, as all cultures will eventually come full circle. This shows that the metaphor of the road is used as a tool to create equivalence between different cultures, places and times, ultimately serving the magic realist purpose of transcending borders and nuancing binary oppositions.

Okri also turns to refiguring traditional African myths in order to express how social change can be achieved, which expresses his hope for the future (of Nigeria).
Azaro's Dad becomes a figure of mythical proportions as well. Although throughout the novel he struggles to provide for his family, his morals always remain intact: he recognizes the façade that both political parties in the novel put up and therefore he refuses to support either party, despite the consequences. Obumselo points out that Dad is a representation of Ogun, a deity who “in folklore, ritual, odo Ifa and mythology is the spirit of creative enterprise and innovation” (32-33). But, he adds that Okri has also turned to recent beliefs about Ogun to shape Dad: “Ogun in the New World is the god of the outcast, the poor, the colonized, the insulted and injured and the wretched of the earth” (33). From this it follows that Dad uses creative thought to help those less fortunate, and this is exactly what he does when he starts his own political party and attempts to restore justice. His dreams are significant:

Time and truth always come round; those who seem to hold and sway and try to prevent the turning of justice only bring it quicker; and Dad wanted the turning now. He wanted justice now. He wanted truth now. He wanted world balance now. [...] He kept asking: WHY? After eons he asked: WHAT MUST WE DO? And then he asked: HOW DO WE BRING IT ABOUT? Pressing on, he wanted to know: WHEN? Relentlessly, twisting and turning, he demanded: WHAT IS THE BEST WAY? And with a bit more serenity, not drawing back from the inevitable self-confrontation, he asked: WHAT IS THE FIRST STEP? (Okri 566-567)

Dad dreams of the better days when justice is restored, and fitting the great significance dreams carry in African storytelling, his dreams show him how he can work towards the restoration of justice. Dad, as a representation of Ogun, takes matters into his own hands and creates a party that will truly benefit those who have been treated unjustly. Ikechi adds that “In using him as an agent of social change, the novelist suggests that social change must be collective” (251). From the excerpt it follows that if all those who wish to see change would actually act upon their dreams, justice would come sooner. Dad serves as an example to not think of oneself as too insignificant to make a difference, because every action moves us closer to the
restoration of justice. Okri uses magic realist techniques to turn this regular, poor
man into a mythical hero in order to show how social change can be collectively
achieved.

Okri’s novel thus uses the fuse of different cultures and myths to be able to
comment on the universal. As I have shown, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* expresses
the need for equivalence between different sets of beliefs. As Esther de Bruijn points
out, *The Famished Road* does the same thing: “Okri’s ambivalence towards each of
the related spiritualities – Christian, Muslim, animist, along with New Age – prevents
any one of them ontological governance over the others” (183). Okri, like Rushdie,
also uses different traditions of storytelling, as is common in magic realism.

Providing long descriptions of surrounds and situations, as is common in traditional
Western realism, but using these techniques to describe the magical occurrences of
the African tales, makes this novel as in-between magic and the real as its main
character Azaro. Olatubosun Ogunsanwo considers this to be a celebration of the
“post” in “postcolonial” as it “incorporates and subverts the orthodox adoption – the
traditionally unmodified adoption – of the European mode of narration, demanding a
re-consideration of the idea of origin and dominance” (45). Thus, by using a
combination of Western and African traditions in his manner of storytelling and the
stories he tells, Okri ensures equivalence. Through magic realism, the most important
theme and message of the novel, which is introduced and explained with these
stories, is that all peoples should value each other and each other’s cultures equally. It
is not up to those on earth to decide who is deserving of what, as it will be decided by
the overarching power of justice.
Ana Castillo uses magic realism to convey criticism that is similar to that of the other two writers in nature. She does this by rewriting myths and legends from Native American, Mexican and Western origins, which are used to create a magic realist novel that is highly critical of the society in which the story takes place. Theresa Delgadillo has pointed out that this is actually the purpose of many Chicano/a narratives, which “go beyond realism to facilitate social change” (888). Chicano/as are Mexican-Americans, who mostly live in the south of the United States, and their experience typically combines influences from U.S. society, as well as Spanish and indigenous traditions. There is disagreement about whether or not the Chicano/a experience should be perceived as a postcolonial one, but Pérez-Torres points out that “we need to be aware of the specificity of the Chicano as a racialized, colonized, migrant and immigrant experience. This experience is highly textured and highly diverse” (33). Thus, not every Chicano/a subject will identify their experience as postcolonial, which is why one should not classify the Chicano/a movement as such without question. Nevertheless, Pérez-Torres points out that considering Chicano literature as postcolonial creates the opportunity to productively compare Chicano literature with other marginal identities, and it will also point towards some of its problems, such as “how to conceptualize a cultural practice while simultaneously acknowledging and resisting delimiting dominant forms of thought” (Pérez-Torres 33). So, in order to compare Castillo with Okri and Rushdie, I will assume that her novel and the criticism she poses in it are postcolonial, and show how she uses magic realist stories to express her postcolonial criticism.
Castillo uses her novel to point out which parts of society need to change, and to do so she relies heavily on the theory of ‘the new mestiza’ which was first described by Gloria Anzaldúa in her work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). This work has proven to be a very influential addition to theory about the Chicana, as it signals many of the problems Chicana women have to face and also presents ways of coping with these struggles. In *Borderlands* Anzaldúa describes the struggle of women from a mixed background, like the Chicana women in Castillo’s novel, who are brought up with the ideas of the superior white American society, but also with beliefs from their Native American and Spanish heritage. This creates difficulties for mestizas because these beliefs are often conflicting, as Anzaldúa has claimed: “[w]ithin us and within la cultura chicana, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture” (78). With these conflicting beliefs as her background, the mestiza does not have one coherent view on the world, but rather several different ones. Anzaldúa considers the way of coping with this is “by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (79). As opposed to Western rationalism, which often presupposes one true answer, the mestiza must learn to live with multiple truths. Because she comes from a mixed background, her history is also conflicted: she is both a descendant of the colonizer and the colonized. The new mestiza deals with this as follows: “she reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths” (Anzaldúa 82). This chapter will provide an analysis of the stories in the novel itself, which are examples of these newly shaped myths, showing how the novel uses magic realism to point out the need for this new mestiza and express criticism about the society in which this new mestiza moves.

The novel opens with a strong focus on magic realism, as the first chapter of the novel contains many magical occurrences, which are an adaptation of the story of
Jesus Christ’s resurrection. Sofia, who is the mother of four daughters, finds her youngest, La Loca, suffering from terrible seizures. After these seizures, La Loca suddenly lies completely still and is pronounced dead. Right before the funeral, La Loca suddenly opens her casket and jumps up onto the roof of the Church. Father Jerome, whose name suggests that he is a representation of the Western Church Father Hieronymus, suggests that La Loca’s resurrection might be the work of the devil. La Loca tells him, “God sent me back to help you all, to pray for you all […] you, and others who doubt just like you, who will never see our Father in heaven!” (Castillo 24), thus suggesting that Father Jerome is not practicing the Christian faith as he should. She floats down from the Church and corrects him again: “Remember, it is I who am here to pray for you. With that stated, she went into the church and those with faith followed” (Castillo 24, emphasis in original). It is especially the last sentence of this passage that invokes a Christ-like image, as La Loca gets her own faithful following. Delgadillo claims that Castillo is here “substituting a Chicana resurrection for Christ’s resurrection, and accordingly creating an alternate religious history or perhaps a new myth” (895). Castillo recreates the story that is at the basis of Roman Catholicism, but instead of a white male, it is a young Chicana who is at the center. This can be interpreted as referring back to when Christianity was first practiced in South and Latin America. As Janet Lindman shows, societies from these regions used to have different gender ideologies, which changed when, despite Native women’s reluctance, they started practicing Christianity. After that, “these native people adapted to the European model of male dominance and female submission” (Lindman 201-202). Thus, it was the spread of Christianity that may have put women from these societies in a marginalized position. Castillo follows Anzaldúa’s opinion that mestizas should create new myths, and in this new story centers Christianity
around the *mestiza woman*. In doing so she points towards the Roman Catholic Church’s role in reinforcing the superior position of white males.

Many of the magic realist occurrences in the novel are events that have destructive effects on the women in the novel, which signals that there is a problem with the treatment of women in Chicano/a society. There is a strong patriarchal tendency in their cultures within the United States, which extends further than the superior position of white males. In addition to this, there is the problem of patriarchal construct that is prevalent in Mexican culture. Men are expected to be “macho”, but the meaning of this word has shifted. In order to explain this, in *Borderlands* Anzaldúa turns towards her own childhood: “For men like my father, being “macho” meant being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love” (83). However, recent generations have not been capable of protecting or supporting their loved ones, and have turned to aggression instead. Not only are Chicanos marginalized in general, within their community women are also positioned lower socially than men. This is symbolized in the novel by the legend of *la malogra*, literally ‘the evil hour’, to show how the male-centered society harms women. Caridad, the third of Sofia’s daughters, is left by her cheating partner Mémo. After this heartbreak, she turns towards a life of going out and sleeping with any man who vaguely resembles Mémo. One night, this goes terribly wrong, and Caridad comes home more dead than alive:

> There was too much blood to see at the time, but after Caridad had been taken by ambulance to the hospital, treated and saved (just barely), Sofi was told that her daughter’s nipples had been bitten off. She had also been scourged with something, branded like cattle. Worst of all, a tracheotomy was performed because she had also been stabbed in the throat. (Castillo 33)

Her assault serves a symbolic function: her nipples represent her ability to give birth and nurture, being scourged likens her to a farm animal, and being stabbed in the
throat can be interpreted as an attempt to take away her voice. The attacker is never caught, because “it wasn’t a man with a face and a name who had attacked and left Caridad mangled like a run-down rabbit” (Castillo 77). Instead, as she lets La Loca and her landlady Felicia know through dreams, Caridad was attacked by a *malogra*, an evil force, which usually leaves its victims literally senseless. Delgadillo argues that the evil spirit “metaphorically describes the force of the institutionalized patriarchal relations that foster disregard for women at every level of society” (907). Caridad’s assault shows how women are damaged by the patriarchal construct, not just through specific encounters with specific men, but also in general. Castillo presents the *malogra* as a mythical representation of all the ways in which the patriarchal construct has hurt women.

Castillo creates a new *mestiza* myth to show how women can empower themselves by refusing to follow the rules that the patriarchal society has imposed on them. After recovering from her attack, Caridad decides to become a *curandera*, a medicine woman, and goes into learning with her landlady, *doña* Felicia. The two go on a pilgrimage together to Chimayo/Tsimayo. As soon as they arrive, Caridad spots a beautiful woman and falls head over heels in love. This confuses her incredibly, and when she follows *doña* Felicia’s advice to go to the hot springs, Caridad gets lost and goes missing for an entire year. When she is found by three men, one of whom is *doña* Felicia’s godson Francisco el Penitente, they attempt to take her:

“You’re coming with us!” one of the brothers said sternly to Caridad [...]. Caridad shook her head. The man dismounted from his Arabian steed and went over to her to pull her firmly toward his horse. She resisted and let herself drop on the ground. He bent down to take her up in his arms, figuring she would be even easier to get on the horse without any resistance but he couldn’t lift her. “What the...!” he said, dumbfounded at how heavy she was although she was only half his size. The other man joined him and finally Francisco el Penitente and yet the young woman could not be budged. (Castillo 86-87)
Although Caridad is not a heavy woman in terms of weight, the three men are not able to take her with them. The word of her story spreads, and eventually turns Caridad into a Saint of some sorts, with hundreds of people embarking on a pilgrimage towards her cave – another new _mestiza_ myth. Colette Morrow calls it a “feminist-lesbian miracle” (75), which signals that it is Caridad’s romantic disinterest in men that strengthens her. Morrow shows how her _malogra_ story of hurt is replaced by “the vision of a woman defying traditional heterosexist constructions of gender” (76). Her non-heterosexual identity sets her free from the masochist society she was once a victim of, as she no longer needs to live up to men’s expectations of women. Castillo uses the magic realist technique of creating a new myth to show how woman can be set free from the burdens of the patriarchal society.

Castillo uses Caridad in another new _mestiza_ myth, with which she shows that the effects of the patriarchy are currently inescapable in the earthly world. Caridad eventually reconnects with the woman she fell in love with, Esmeralda, but at that time they do not know their relationship will kill them. Francisco el Penitente has fallen in love with Caridad, but when he finds out that Esmeralda is the object of her love, he wants revenge. Francisco takes Esmeralda in his car, and although it is unclear what happens exactly, it is suggests that he violates her physically and/or sexually. Moreover, he follows Caridad and Esmeralda on a journey to Sky City. As soon as the latter spots Francisco, she jumps off the _mesa_ with Caridad by her side:

[Francisco] went to the edge of the mesa along with the other tourists in Sky City [...]. But much to all their surprise, there were no morbid remains of splintered bodies tossed to the ground, down, down, like bad pottery of glass or old bread. There weren’t even whole bodies lying peaceful. There was nothing. Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Caridad would be safe and live forever. (Castillo 211)
The women have jumped from a 350-feet-high *mesa*, but they seem to have disappeared. Instead of an impulsive suicide, Caridad’s death is another new *mestiza* myth in which she returns to her indigenous roots (Martínez 223). Delgadillo points out that both women have “a spirituality consistently grounded in the landscape and people around them, a religious practice that values their selves and their bodies, and a life dedicated to helping others” (90). This makes the miracle a criticism of disrespect towards the landscape as well as towards disrespecting one’s own body or someone else’s. The spirit deity who guides Caridad and Esmeralda into the earth is “the female spirit and intelligence that is everywhere and everything” (Delgadillo 904), in other words, a female Goddess or a Mother Earth. The new *mestiza* myth shows that during their life on earth, women cannot be freed from the oppression by men, but if they remain connected with *mestiza* spirituality, they will finally be able to be free in the spirit world.

Castillo utilizes magic realism also to show how women are misunderstood and thus demonized, by reinterpreting the myth of ‘La Llorona’, or ‘The Weeping Woman’. *La Llorona* is a mythical figure that has existed within Mexican, or in this case Chicano/a, culture. Domino Perez summarizes a popular traditional version of the story:

La Llorona is a woman abandoned by the man she loved and left alone to raise their children. Grief or desire for revenge compels La Llorona to murder her children and throw their bodies into a river. Despair ultimately contributes to La Llorona’s death, and in the afterlife, she is condemned to wander for all of eternity until the bodies of her children are recovered. (2)

Because of her wrongdoings, *La Llorona* is generally feared, and her myth is used as a way to warn Chicano/a children to refrain from getting close to rivers. However, by Esperanza, the eldest daughter, connecting with her, *La Llorona’s* story is redefined: she is no longer an evil spirit that is to be feared, but she is reinterpreted as a loving
mother who was desperate, or as Sofia says: a “mother who was only human and anyone is capable at some point when pushed into a corner like a rat to devour her babies in order to save them, so to speak” (Castillo 161-162). Eventually, Esperanza passes, which sets her free, as Carmela Delia Lanza asserts: “Once Esperanza becomes a spirit, she is no longer a victim or an object of the white world. She belongs to a world that Anzaldúa boldly asserts exists, a spiritual world that “the whites are so adamant in denying” (69). She was often misunderstood in her earthly life, for example when she went to cover news stories from the Gulf war. However, like La Llorona, she is now set free of earthly judgement. After Esperanza passes, she sends La Llorona to inform her family of her death:

Who better but La Llorona could the spirit of Esperanza have found, come to think of it, if not a woman who had been given a bad rap by every generation of her people since the beginning of time and yet, to Esperanza’s spirit-mind, La Llorona in the beginning (before men got in the way of it all) may have been nothing short of a loving mother goddess. (Castillo 162-163).

Thus, through the magic realist appearance of La Llorona and, later, of Esperanza in the earthly world, Castillo shows how La Llorona is not as evil as she is portrayed by society. The reinterpreted story shows that women’s wrongdoings do not occur because women are inherently evil, but because they are left with no other choice due to external factors. The daughters in Castillo’s novel experience much criticism throughout the novel on their actions, even though for the most part they do not commit any actions that would be perceived as morally unjust. While women are condemned, it is the men who cheat, steal and betray. Castillo uses magic realism to critique the unfairly negative portrayal of women as opposed to the societal cover-up of men’s wrongdoings.

Castillo uses La Loca again in a new myth, creating for her a Saint status through which she can comment on what is wrong in the Chicano/a society. Despite
La Loca’s reclusive lifestyle, and her refraining from human contact, she is diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, but because this is not technically possible, this should be seen as a magical occurrence, as Hamilton shows (104). She eventually passes away from this disease, after which she acquires a new status as a Saint: becoming ““Patrona de todas les criaturas” – Patron of all God’s creatures, animal and human alike” (Castillo 232). After her death, La Loca sometimes reappears to her mother, but in her status as a Saint she lives on constantly. Her icon depicts her the way she looked in the Cross Procession on Holy Friday in which she represented Jesus. Hamilton points out that because La Loca has kept in touch with her spirituality until her very death, this allows for her to be used by Castillo “to advance a politicized, U.S. Third World feminist, material feminist, and ecofeminist agenda”(93). Indeed, in the passage about the aforementioned Cross Procession, Castillo lists all the ways in which the Chicano/a lives have been destroyed by outside influences:

Jesus bore his cross and a man declared that most of the Native and Latino families throughout the land were living below poverty level. […]

Jesus met his mother, and three Navajo women talked about uranium contamination on the reservation, and the babies they gave birth to with brain damage and cancer. […]

Jesus was helped by Simon and the number of those without jobs increased each day.

Veronica wiped the blood and sweat from Jesus’ face. Livestock drank and swam in contaminated canals.

Jesus fell for the second time. (Castillo 242-243)

La Loca-as-Jesus dies on the cross, not for the sins of her community, but for all the sins that have been committed at the cost of her community. Thus, La Loca’s saintly status is used to uncover the problematic position of Chicano/as in the United States. Castillo rewrites the myth in order to point out all the wrongdoings of which her people have been forced to bear the destructive consequences.

Castillo also uses the “fantastic rhetoric”, which Hegerfeldt identifies as a feature of magic realism, in order to show what the dangers of a mestiza losing touch
with her cultural heritage are. Fe, the second daughter of Sofia, chases the American Dream, and after marrying her cousin Casey, she starts working at a weapon factory in order to make money to put toward her all-American home. What she does not realize at the time is that the job pays so well because she is working with dangerous chemicals. This has disastrous consequences:

And that is when they found out that Fe had cancer. She had cancer on the outside and the inside and there was no stopping it by then. [...] The rest of this story is hard to relate. Because after Fe died, she did not resurrect as La Loca did at age three. She also did not return ectoplasmically like her tenacious earth-bound sister Esperanza. Very shortly after that first prognosis, Fe just died. And when someone dies that plain dead, it is hard to talk about. (Castillo 186)

Remarkably, Fe’s death is shocking precisely because it a realistic death, which is where Castillo uses the fantastic rhetoric: the empirical event of Fe’s death is portrayed as something unusual, magic almost. It is Fe’s dreams of doing things differently than her mother that kill her: “In Fe’s chase for the American Dream, she only finds infertility, deception and ultimately a death that unlike her sisters’ deaths, offers no spiritual transformation or resurrection” (Delia Lanza 72). Fe’s death is another criticism on the American ways: she works with chemicals that are harmful to Earth, animals and people; the factory produces weapons that are used in the Persian Gulf War; and it is the poor minorities who are employed in these dangerous circumstances. Kamala Platt argues that Fe is “at least partly responsible for her own demise because Fe does not question the work that she does, even though it is quite obvious that this work hurts her and others” (qtd. in Halperin 110). This is the point Castillo is making, as Fe is the only sister who is not able to come back to her family spiritually. Moreover, her body is so damaged her family decides to cremate her rather than having a traditional Roman Catholic burial. Fe dies such a permanent and tragic death because she has lost touch with her spiritual mestiza identity. Castillo
erases the boundaries of the binary opposition of magic and the real to emphasize the importance for Chicana women to remain in contact with their *mestiza* background.

Castillo uses magic realism in order to create and re-write myths, now featuring Chicana women, in order to show how they are affected negatively in American society. The stories show how Chicana women are marginalized in society. Laura Halperin points out that by juxtaposing Western realism and indigenous magic, “Castillo positions the psychological and corporeal injury the sisters experience and the grief the mother faces against a backdrop of land appropriation and environmental genocide” (18). In this sense, the sisters represent the land and the mother represents the Native/Chicana inhabitants. The land is hurt by the American patriarchy, which is in direct opposition with the indigenous matriarchy, and the sisters are hurt by this same construct, whereas the mother loses her daughters much like the land has been taken away from its original inhabitants. This shows that the novel expresses both geopolitical and ecological criticism. Feminist criticism is also prevalent in the novel, as women are constantly hurt by men, be it by the white patriarchal U.S. society, or by the Chicano men in the novel who harm the girls (Hamilton 98). *So Far from God* uses magic realism to subvert notions of superiority, question the authority behind these supposed truths, and thus creates a new space wherein equivalence is most important. Although Chicano literature is not always considered postcolonial, and this novel is inherently different from *Midnight’s Children* and *The Famished Road* in that it expresses feminist beliefs as well, there are also many similarities to be found. All three novels use magic realism to create equivalence, and although Castillo’s focus is on the emancipation of women, Okri and Rushdie’s novel can be considered emancipatory as well, though for the emancipation of cultures marginalized by colonialism, which shows how magic realism can be used for a variety of purposes.
Conclusion

Magic realism, as a genre that allows for equivalence to be created, has been used in many ways in many parts of the world. The many literary techniques that serve this equalizing purpose have allowed for writers from different marginalized positions to simultaneously acknowledge and undermine the dominant worldview, as well as their own. Whereas some critics have argued that magic realism only belongs to one particular literary tradition, either Latin American or African, in this thesis I regard novels from African, Latin American and Indian writers and they all use magic realism to comment on the postcolonial state of their country. Hegerfeldt is right to raise the question: “why should the incorporation of Latin American myth into a realistic setting make a text magic realist, whereas the incorporation of, say, African or Asian myth does not” (28). The three works, *Midnight’s Children*, *The Famished Road* and *So Far from God* indeed all make use of magical occurrences in empirically real environments. They all have their own specific points to make with this technique, but they do all advocate equivalence between different worldviews and use rewritten stories to express social and political criticism.

Magic realism uses traditional storytelling as an important and useful tool in expressing opinions or transferring knowledge via literature, which is significant because in the indigenous cultures of all three novels storytelling had a great importance. In Okri’s novel, the stories that are told by older characters to Azaro teach him important lessons about the world, for example: the story of the road teaches him that time is cyclical and that all peoples work toward the same, essentially unachievable goal. For the characters in Castillo’s *So Far from God*, the stories of *la malogra* and *La Llorona*, which were originally used to warn Chicano/a children about the evils that might await them, are proven to carry a metaphorical
significance with them, and in that significance there is truth. Hegerfeldt argues that “telling stories is compatible with telling truth, provided that truth is not restricted to literal or referential truth, but includes metaphorical, poetic or social conceptions of truth” (104). This is shown by the stories in this thesis, which function as warnings or life lessons, and are in that sense true in their own context. As an element of magic realism, storytelling undermines the superior position of empirical information, as it can have similar success in transferring knowledge. Thus, a state of equivalence between factual truth and fictional or metaphorical truth acknowledges the important functions stories can have, and in that sense gives more importance to literature itself as well.

Magic realism is also used to undermine the important status of historical narrative. A novel like Midnight’s Children, which has constructed an alternative version of an important historical narrative, unveils the fabricated nature of such narrative. Although Western historiography is intended to portray factual truth, its narrative is, of course, always constructed, which would make its reliance on truth doubtful from a Western point of view. In this case, for England it would be more flattering to portray the independence of the new nation of India as a beneficial development, as it is due to their colonisation that the nation took its current shape. Rushdie tells a different story, of a nation that has no common background and therefore no true coherence, and which cannot escape the effects of colonialism. As was shown in the chapter about The Famished Road, Okri reinterprets the story of colonialism itself – painting a different picture, in which the African people merely experience disadvantages due to colonialism, rather than the white people bringing democracy and wealth to their area. In addition to this, his novel describes how Nigeria is still experiencing the aftermath of colonialism through the greedy and corrupt government. Castillo also changes the history of the United States as her
novel points toward the hurt that indigenous peoples have experienced due to imperialism and colonialism, which still harms these minority cultures within the United States today. All three novels show the negative effects of colonialism by subverting the Western point of view. I would conclude that magic realism serves to take away the authority of Western historiography, which is written from the point of view of the colonizer, arguing that the history of the colonised is just as important.

All three novels use magic realism to show how giving more importance to the Western lifestyle can have harmful consequences. Although *So Far from God* is not unanimously considered postcolonial, Castillo’s portrayal of the destructive American influences on the lives of Chicano/as has this same point of departure. Castillo uses the Holy Procession passage to point out what harm has been done to her people: when the Europeans first came to America, they took away land from her Native ancestors, and later they pressured the Mexican people into selling their land. Now, Chicano/a people are perceived as minority or migrant people, and should assimilate in order to be successful. However, in her portrayal of Fe’s American Dream, Castillo shows how this can be destructive because it counters the beliefs of Chicano/a culture. In Okri’s novel, Western technology is most often presented as harmful, as it destroys nature, which is so closely linked to the spiritual and mythical. Moreover, the Western form of democracy is shown to be dysfunctional in African society, as Obumselo describes, by portraying politics through the eyes of the child Azaro, “the aggressive instinct and will to power [...] seem to be at the root of politics” (30). The Western view on politics, Okri says, is not suitable for these African nations. Rushdie expresses a similar message, as he shows how Western democracy has divided the country of India more than ever. The magic realist novels show how forcing a Western lifestyle on non-Western people or nations can have very negative influences, thus proving that such a worldview does not deserve its current authority.
The magic realist authors’ reinterpretations of stories of many different religions and traditions also work to create equivalence between all of those beliefs. *Midnight’s Children* extensively makes use of figures from all the religions that are practiced in India, be it Islam, Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism. Of course, because the novel is an allegory of India, the extensive references to different religions also function as a way of pointing out how religiously diverse the people of India are. In *The Famished Road* there are references to many different beliefs as well, especially those of Judaism, Christianity, sometimes Islam, and the African mythical gods and stories. However, the separation between the religions is not clear, as, for example, Azaro’s mother tells him that the gods of the West have been taken from African cultures. Rather, Okri’s novel gives the impression that all religions are essentially different paths toward the same goal. Finally, Castillo uses the Roman Catholicism, Native American and Mexican myths in her novel, so she does not portray the same equality between all the major religions. She shows how Christianity has taken some aspects of Native American beliefs and now presents them as their own, for example with the pilgrimage to Chimayo/Tsimayo, which is a place that is now considered holy for both groups. With this, she undermines the superior positioning of Christianity as the founding religion, as she shows how beliefs from Native America were appropriated. I conclude that all three novels use magic realism based on religious stories to create equivalence between the different religions, which is important for postcolonial literature, as these writers must cope with different belief systems and religions influencing them.

The great difference between the novels by Rushdie and Okri and *So Far from God* is their treatment of women. In *Midnight’s Children*, although there are many empowering passages describing women who are headstrong and powerful, Rushdie also often portrays women, the widows in the novel especially, as witches. Although
the purpose of this is to critique Indira Gandhi, “The Widow”, it also demonizes these other women. As for The Famished Road, Azaro describes women as simultaneously strong and powerless. For example, his own mother cannot stop her husband from pursuing his wrestling career despite the fact that she and her son have barely anything to eat because of it. This suggests that women do not really have a voice in the novel’s country, and the way in which she bears these burdens without complaint, although on the one hand makes her a strong character, also makes her appear rather menial. Castillo, however, in the footsteps of Gloria Anzaldúa, portrays Chicana women from a pronounced feminist standpoint. Her novel demonstrates how Sofia and her four daughters are negatively influenced by the American patriarchy, and by the harmful “macho” behaviour of the Chicano men. Through the apparition and reinterpretation of La Llorona she has portrayed how women are maligned. Her novel also shows Chicana women how they can cope with the patriarchy by remaining strongly connected with each other and with their spirituality, as Anzaldúa has also described for her new mestiza. Hegerfeldt points out that postcolonialism and feminism are alike because both perspectives speak from a marginal position (122). Therefore, magic realism, which is a very suitable technique for postcolonial texts, works so well for Castillo’s feminist purposes as well. Both feminism and postcolonialism aim to challenge the dominant power, and magic realism serves this purpose.

All three novels advocate a need for equality or equivalence and undermine the superior position of the Western point of view. Rushdie’s novel expresses the need for equivalence of different religions, and argues that religion should remain separated from politics at all times. His novel also emphasizes the importance of metaphorical truth as well as the questioning of Western historiography. Castillo focuses on a need for equality between Hispanic and American people, and between the spiritual
practices of Christianity and the Hispanic culture. Moreover, she strongly expresses the problems of inequality between men and women. Okri’s *The Famished Road* poses a need for equality as well, as Obobolo describes Okri’s tendency “to deconstruct both the geographical and metaphorical boundaries and limitations of the universe, and advocate for a boundless world – a world where even the spirit beings and human beings are free to come together without the slightest trace of prejudice” (53). Okri advocates a true equivalence for all, which is also the message that is at the core of magic realism: every point of view, every experience, every version of the truth should be treated equally. I show in this thesis that magic realism is used productively in literatures from different parts of the world, and that it can be used differently by every author in order to advance their particular point of view. Although in this thesis I focus on the use of magic realism in postcolonial novels, Castillo’s use of magic realism to voice her feminist stance proves that magic realism is not exclusively postcolonial. It seems to me magic realism could be used by an author writing from any kind of margin in order to subvert the dominant force they are writing against. It would be revelatory of how boundless magic realism truly is, if and how the genre would work when employed by a migrant or minority writer, or, for example, by an author who is marginalized because they do not conform to society’s standards because of sexuality or ability. This would answer the question whether magic realism could truly achieve a state of equivalence.
Works Cited


