



A Concept of Characteristics of Magical Realism in Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls*: A Merger of Objective and Adolescent Psychological Approach

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Abstract— This article aims to apply the concept of characteristics of magical realism proposed by Wendy B. Faris and the theory of adolescent psychology by Dr. Arthur T. Jersild in the novel *A Monster Calls* to categorize the novel as a magical realism, also to analyze and discuss the psychological connection between two dominant characters in the novel, Conor and The Monster. The research is an amalgamation of objective or structural study to describe each characteristic of magical realism found in the text and adolescent psychology study as extrinsic approach to explain any discrepancy.

It is inferred that the novel *A Monster Calls* belongs to a magical realism according to the findings as it contains all five characteristics suggested by Faris. A discrepancy is found in one aspect regarding the 'realness' of The Monster as the irreducible element which shows that the character is only visible for Conor. It is then explained through the eye of psychology, resulting in a very strong relationship between it and Conor which gives an understanding that they are, in fact, one character. The discrepancy found in the character of The Monster shows that The Monster is Conor's own alter ego.

Keywords— *Magical realism, adolescent psychology, A Monster Calls.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'magical realism' has been a huge topic both in art and literature since Franz Roh first introduced the term to explain the birth of post-Expressionism (Hart, 2005) which then became popular in Latin America especially after the publication of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967. The novel was a remarkable emerge in postcolonialism genre during the Latin American Boom in 1960s and 1970s, bringing a lot of different definitions and opinions about magical realism from many scholars (Hart, 2005). Roh in his essay *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerie (Post-Expressionism, Magical Realism)* defines magical realism as a concept of "the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces" (Roh, 1925). He believes that magical realism explains any miracle or 'magical' events happen in this world through dynamic molecules in reality, means that

something 'magical' is a part of real world or vice versa (Roh, 1925). He explains that to understand magical realism, one must believe in the magical element or the extraordinary consciously to actually discover its meaning in life (Roh, 1925). Roh also has used the word 'magical' as a replacement to the word 'mystical' to change the stigma of primitive literature and civilization to more scientific study and definition (Camayd-Freixas, 2014).

Other opinion comes from Alejo Carpentier in his essay *On the Marvelous Real in America* (1949). He has recommended to find the fantastic or 'magical' element of magical realism inside our own reality because it lives within this real world, and not by hiding or covering it with fantasy as "the presence and vitality of this marvelous real" can be found everywhere. According to Bowers (2004), the definition of magical realism can be broken by understanding its literal meaning, in which she defines that realism "allows the writer to present many details that

contribute to a realistic impression" while magic "refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science".

In addition to that understanding, Wendy B. Faris in her book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004) briefly explains that magical realism is a "hybrid nature of much postcolonial society" because it provides such cultural ground to a broad study in literature while "also represents innovation and the re-emergence of submerged narrative traditions in metropolitan centers", opening a new and refreshing material to cover. Faris and Angel Flores (1995) both also define magical realism as a merger of realism and fantasy, blending any distinction between the two. Because magical realism and fantasy literature appear to have very similar style and substance, this definition clears out any confusion about the meaning of the two: magical realism is a realism and not a fantasy, it is the emergent of the magical element of fantasy in our own real world and see it as a part of reality.

However, the appearance of this magical element somehow is hard to be accepted especially by the Western empirical logic. According to Mahfudz (2017), the extraordinary in magical realism often acts as a therapist or psychologist for the main character, to help them solving their problems in life, basically having a certain purpose in the main character's life. Its real identity as a character lets the readers transcend their own mind; thoughts, opinions, and experience to understand its purpose because reading magical realism is very based on one's belief. Having a lot to deal with relationships between characters and readers, the extraordinary is strongly correlated with human psychology.

To study this connection between magical realism and psychology of literature in a character of a narrative, one must first study the characteristics which make a 'magical realism' text. In the modern world of literature, the distinctive features of magical realism are still difficult to understand and to propose, looking at the complexity of the mode itself. Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has become a great sample to picture how a magical realism text should be, it produces some ideas which are then marked generally as important components of magical realism, for example *paucity*, *momentariness*, and *authorial reticence* as studied by Kasikhan (2013). Faris, mostly inspired by Marquez's work and his points of view, creates a complete concept of magical realism containing the characteristics one must obtain. According to her, a magical realism narrative must possess these five aspects: *an irreducible element*, *the phenomenal world*, *the unsettling doubts*, *merging realms*, and *disruption of space, time, and identity* (Faris, 2004). *The irreducible element* in magical realism,

called as "the magical" or "the fantastic", is an important feature to distinguish the text from other genres. Because its appearance is beyond logic, it disobeys the rule of nature and reality, especially because it is experienced by other characters which are mostly real people.

Two researches done by Kasikhan (2013) and Mahfudz (2017) use different concepts of characteristics of magical realism to analyze a novel, however the two have resulted in the same conclusion that a novel is/is not a magical realism. Kasikhan's research has found that Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum* has approached a fantasy literature rather than a magical realism. Being analyzed and compared with Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the novel is lack of Authorial Reticence aspect which Marquez has introduced as an important point of magical realism. Meanwhile, Mahfudz has applied the concept of characteristics of magical realism proposed by Faris (2004) in the novel *A Shinagawa Monkey* by Haruki Murakami, resulting in the lack of one minor aspect regarding *the disruption of time* in the novel. However, the novel can still be called as magical realism. The weakness is that they do not further discuss the result especially using a psychological approach to explain a discrepancy found in the analysis. On top of the note, the objective of this research is to find the characteristics of magical realism in a novel and explain a discrepancy found in the analysis using other approach, in this case adolescence psychology.

In the eye of psychologist, this "magical" creature or phenomenon is connected a lot with one's imagination, dreams, and fantasy, in which one mixes the vision with their own experience or hope in life (Jersild, 1959), especially if *the irreducible element* is invisible for others. The individual usually begins to create this vision since they were a kid until their teenager time, because children are dreamers and teenagers are "veteran in the world of fantasy" (Jersild, 1959). To understand the appearance of "the magical" in the point of view of an adolescent character, an adolescence psychology approach is needed to analyze its connection.

II. METHODS

This research is a merger of objective research as intrinsic approach and psychology theory as extrinsic approach. It uses a descriptive qualitative type as research design as it focuses on observing and describing the appearance of the five characteristics of magical realism proposed by Faris (2004) in a novel as well as applying a certain stage of adolescent psychology theory composed by Jersild (1959). The novel used as the primary data is *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness (2016). Data showing information and proofs regarding the aspects of magical

realism in the novel are collected through continuous reading, classifying, and comparing with the theory used. Other supporting analysis and information found in journals, articles, and online sources are used as the secondary data.

The primary data are in the form of words, sentences, narration, paragraphs, and dialogues between characters in the novel which state the existence of every characteristic of magical realism developed by Faris; *the irreducible element, the phenomenon world, the unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruption of space, time, and identity*. Any discrepancy found in the discussion between the used theory and the result of analysis is then explained through the theory of adolescent psychology especially regarding anger and hostility as the story deals a lot with a character's emotion and feelings. The theory of adolescent's Emotional Development by Dr. Arthur T. Jersild is used to describe the missing aspect for further analysis. The secondary data are used to support and strengthen the evidences and arguments in analyzing the problems.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It has been stated above that according to Faris (2004), a magical realism text should contain five distinct characteristics in order to be differentiated with other genres. The first feature is the existence of *the irreducible element* or "the magical", something which cannot be explained "according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse" (Faris, 2004). In *A Monster Calls*, the appearance of "the magical" happens in a form of a giant, grown from a yew tree in the main character's backyard. This giant character is so bizarre especially because no one have actually seen a monstrous creature like that in reality. It is then called as "The Monster". The Monster first emerged when the main character, Conor, had a nightmare. He woke up and found that a yew tree giant had appeared in his window, wanting to tell him stories. Even though Conor was surprised at first and thought that he was still dreaming, he then managed to be calm and just accepted The Monster's existence in his reality.

The irreducible element has to be accepted as a part of reality in order to make it 'real', and it rarely causes comments, questions, or explanation of its origin either from the characters, narrator, or even the readers (Faris, 2004). That is why Conor just accepted The Monster even if he was confused, frightened, and hesitated. However, the problem with The Monster itself is that its presence is invisible for other characters. It can only be seen by Conor, in which it is contradictory of what Mahfudz (2017) states that an irreducible element should be sensed by other characters without any question or judgement, therefore

creating a discrepancy between the theory and the result of discussion. According to magical realism, this character is a real creature. However, The Monster is a subject of which the condition of its invisibility depends on itself.

In the novel, there is no statement showing clearly that The Monster is invisible for others which also creates a speculation that The Monster covered its own existence from other people. This fact suits what Jersild (1959) has stated in his theory that a character is created by its own artist, in this case, Conor, to help him release his emotion without no one realizing it. An important aspect of *the irreducible element* in magical realism is that it appears as a companion for the main character, as it often acts as a psychologist to help the main character solving their problems in life, like what happens in Haruki Murakami's *A Shinagawa Monkey*. According to Mahfudz (2017), the monkey in the novel functions to solve the main character's problems. In *A Monster Calls*, The Monster came right at the time when Conor needed a help to cope with his own feelings and hope in his life, something he could not do by himself. It also functions to heal Conor's psychological condition because of many pressures he has at home and school. The Monster's stories are also projections to Conor's own life and his feelings toward conditions he did not accept or understand, later making him able to express his actual wishes and emotion. The character of The Monster comes as Conor's form of emotion, particularly his anger.

Anger is very important and crucial in adolescent's life, as it gives control to an adolescent to express things that bother them or things that do not appear the way they want to. However, an adolescent may not be able to express or control the rage very well, can be caused by many aspects (Jersild, 1959). Conor is one of those adolescents who could not express his anger freely because he has many pressures. His mother is dying from cancer and has to go through a lot of medications, so that he needs to be able to manage his own life and take care of himself. He has to watch his mother suffering alone without his father, not to mention the pressures he gets because he has to live with his grandmother, of which they do not get along. His father also refuses to let Conor to live with him in America, which makes things even harder. The last reason of his anger is the pressures he receives in school. He is being continuously bullied by his classmates and contradictory with that, he also receives different, almost special treatment from his friends and teachers, all because of his mother's sickness. Conor seems fine to go through that all, while in fact, he holds a lot of anger which later bring him to a revenge.

According to Jersild, there are two kinds of anger expressed by an individual, direct form of anger and indirect

or disguised form of anger (Jersild, 1959). Conor is not succeed in expressing his anger directly, which later leads him to his hostility towards himself as he fails to find the answers of his problems (Jersild, 1959). Thus, he unconsciously curbs his anger and projects it in other disguised forms. Because Conor is a veteran in the world of fantasy and imagination, his anger mostly takes form of dream and fantasy. He projects his fear of his mother's death and his anger of her cancer to a nightmare. Inside his nightmare, her cancer changes form to a monster pulling her to fall from a cliff. Even though he tries to hold on to her, her hand will always slip from his grasps. Conor himself actually understands his mother's condition and knows that someday she will lose the battle, but he keeps denying the fact.

The other expression of his anger is his creation of The Monster. Conor chooses a monster because it is a strong character to help him raging his emotion and anger. The yew tree itself is a tree of healing, it can be a metaphor to heal his own self too. The Monster helps him to study his own feelings, to understand his true wishes and hopes, to be honest with himself, to realize and accept the facts that his mother will die soon, and that he actually wishes her to go. Because he cannot express his anger very well, his fantasy of The Monster functions as a form of solace, where he can create an ideal condition to release his anger and stress, something he cannot do while he is being "Conor". Through The Monster, Conor is given the chance to be like the way he wants to be, to be angry.

The second aspect is the presence of *the phenomenon world*. It is basically the evidence of reality, a setting of world we live as an ordinary human being based the idea of empirical logic. This aspect is important in magical realism because it sets the story in realism state, not making it a fantasy. Its presence needs to be strong to remind the readers that the story actually happens in real life. The setting of place, the atmosphere of the story, and the events happen in *A Monster Calls* are very familiar, it is more or less *the phenomenon world*. The story apparently takes place in England and there are also some presences of *America*, stated by Conor when he wanted to stay with his father who is living there. Other description of places like school, bedroom, kitchen, a wood-paneled office of Conor's grandmother's and daily activities like doing dishes, going to school, going to hospital, driving car, and putting on school uniforms are all enough to set the readers on the ground and not mix it with fantasy-setting.

The next characteristic of magical realism is the feeling of *unsettling doubts*. This hesitation can be felt both by the characters and the readers at the same time. This feeling is experienced in categorizing whether or not a

character or situation is an *irreducible element*. According to Faris (2004), this hesitation is caused because readers cannot differentiate two contradictory events at once very well, thus resulting in the confusion in understanding two different realms. However, this confusion is important as it shows how magical realism really works. The feeling of *unsettling doubts*, on the other hand, is really based on one's cultural perspectives. Readers who are familiar with non-logical ideas or concept will be more aware with "the magical" appears in the story, compare to those who are not familiar with such cultures. Conor himself, is probably very "Western" and has been growing up with Western empirical logic, making him very unfamiliar with the character of The Monster. Most of the time, he still thinks that The Monster is just a dream, pointing the fact that it is a giant yew tree that talks like human and interferes his nights with its tales.

However, Conor also realizes that The Monster is a real character, "happening" in his reality, as it leaves traces for him to see and to sense its presence. From yew tree leaves and red yew berries to small tree grown from the wooden floor of his grandmother's house, those are all real objects and hints from The Monster itself to remind Conor that it is real. Being very confused, Conor's denials are basically just him making sure that he has not gotten crazy or mad. He starts making possible reasons of why the yew tree leaves and red yew berries, even the small tree, are "there", to make sure that he is still in real life and not dreaming. In this state, he has not yet realized if The Monster is his own creation because of the proofs The Monster left. In the novel, all of Conor's hesitations are leading the readers to feel exactly the same with him, to question whether we are still in his reality or not.

The fourth aspect is *merging realms*, the process of merging of two realms become one, in this case Conor's realm and The Monster's realm. It mostly happens in Conor's backyard, with The Monster standing there and telling stories. It sometimes appears in grandmother's house as well, just casually sitting or standing inside the house, filling the house as the real set or *the phenomenon world* with such magical atmosphere. This characteristic brings to the last form of Conor's disguised anger, which is displaced hostility (Jersild, 1959). The example of this hostility is projected by him to his grandmother's house when The Monster appears and encourages Conor to destroy whatever it wants Conor to project. In the story, The Monster projects its own imagery of a place to Conor and asks him to destroy everything they see, and it apparently helps Conor to release his stress. When Conor is destroying her belongings, he feels satisfied as well as feeling safe knowing that he can finally express his anger in a right way because he thinks that the action is just fake and inside his head. However, when the reality hits him, the place he is destroying is his

grandmother's house and its belongings. In one scene they are in some place, and in another scene, they are just inside his grandmother's house.

The *merging realms* also happens in school when The Monster's presence isn't sensed by the whole students in school hall by the time Conor punches his bully's face. Conor believes that it is The Monster who does that, while in fact, it is all himself. This fantasy helps Conor to do revenge for he would not be able to do that in reality. Somehow Conor realizes that he does that consciously even though he is unable to control his own rage. This, according to Jersild (1959), is a blend between the real and the imagined experienced by Conor who creates the character of The Monster inside his own body. This also explains The Monster's invisibility for other characters as it is just Conor himself and vice versa. The Monster is a fantastical projection of Conor's long held anger which he can never show while he was being himself, and it helps him understand his own self.

For some moments, *merging realms* needs to be experienced by other characters as well, however there is no evidence in the novel that other characters can see The Monster the way Conor does. This fact somehow lets readers to transcend their own mind to speculate the existence of The Monster itself, but the scene in school is still a process of *merging realms* as The Monster presences itself in Conor's reality by standing behind him as he hits his bully. The Monster is just a media for Conor to release his emotions because he does not have control to manage his own self, and thus creating the scene of merging two realms.

The last characteristic is *the disruptions of space, time, and identity*, which are strongly connected with the process of *merging realms*. The idea of space and time disruption happens in the story setting while disruption of identity happens inside a character. In *A Monster Calls*, the disruption of space happens because the existence of The Monster in reality causes confusion and hesitation. The set of ordinary places in the novel are disrupted by the appearance of The Monster as the magical element, changing the atmosphere and the physical form of the space. Connected with adolescent psychology, this process also happens just in Conor's head. Because he experiences the merging of two realms, disruption of space is needed as it means that his reality is not reality anymore. His imagination of The Monster creates such space to put The Monster inside, within his own space, thus disturbs the appearance of *the phenomenon world* he lives.

Meanwhile, the disruption of time happens every 12.07, the time when The Monster comes. It belongs to a disruption because right after The Monster disappears, the

time does not move even for a second. The appearance of The Monster creates its own parallel time dimension and refuses to obey the universe's law of time, which also happens inside Conor's own head according to his emotional development. It is impossible for him/The Monster to actually stop the time because it against the empirical logic of how the world works, so he put his creation and its action in a certain period of time which is different from the reality time to 'play' the imagination.

The last disruption which is disruption of identity happens inside the character of The Monster. The Monster does not only act as its own character, it also appears to be Conor's therapist or psychologist to help him release his own emotion and feelings. It helps Conor to face the truth that his mother will die soon and that he does not want her to suffer anymore even if it means of losing her. Conor needs its help to understand what he really wishes for and just to be honest with himself. Its character has two identities, thus making all the scenes related to its character as disruptions of identity.

From the discussion above, it is clear that the novel *A Monster Calls* can be categorized as a magical realism as it contains all five aspects, however it is found that the invisibility of The Monster for other characters can reduce the 'realness' of its presence. It also causes a discrepancy between the theory and the result of discussion. Thus far, the invisibility of The Monster itself is not stated clearly in the novel, creating many speculations from the readers. It could be that The Monster itself does not want anyone else to see it, or other possibilities. The theory of adolescent psychology is suitable to explain this discrepancy as the character of The Monster deals a lot with an adolescent, Conor himself. The specific stage of adolescent's emotional development regarding anger and hostility is used to describe their connection because anger and hostility appear to be a big issue in *A Monster Calls*.

IV. CONCLUSION

According to Faris' concept of magical realism, the novel *A Monster Calls* encounters a missing aspect from the characteristics of The Monster as *the irreducible element* as it is only visible for the main character, thus causing a discrepancy. The missing aspect is then explained through the theory of adolescent psychology, resulting in a whole different point of view of magical realism in the novel. The five aspects of magical realism are then strongly connected with that fact, following these findings; the relationship between The Monster as *the irreducible element* and the main character is inseparable as they are actually one character, supported by the fact that *the unsettling doubts* are also felt by the main character, not

only the readers, in realizing the existence of The Monster. The *merging* of the main character's *realm* which is *the phenomenon world* and The Monster's *realm* as two different medias is connected with *disruptions of space, time, and identity* from the 'reality' in which the main character uses as objects to include his imagination into. The Monster acts as the main character's alter ego to help him express his emotions he could not express when he is being himself, because of many aspects and pressures. The Monster is the main character himself and vice versa, hence somehow it is invisible for others.

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