

MAGICAL REALISM IN ANDREA CREMER AND DAVID LEVITHAN'S NOVEL *INVISIBILITY*

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Abstract

Andrea Cremer and David Levithan's *Invisibility* is a contemporary novel with a twist of magical realism. Stephen and Elizabeth, the main characters, had made the story in the novel different colors. The study focused on how magical realism was presented in the novel through its five characteristics: irreducible element, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity. Applying Wendy B. Faris' perspective, this study examined extraordinary things that happened within the ordinary to sort them into said characteristics of magical realism. The qualitative research method applied proved that in Cremer and Levithan's *Invisibility*, there existed extraordinary events for each magical realism element, such as Stephen's abrupt disappearance when Elizabeth blinked as the irreducible element; Stephen's acceptance of being invisible and living in a accessible place like New York as the phenomenal world; Elizabeth's doubts concerning Stephen's form as the unsettling doubt; an ordinary-looking comic store being a magical office in disguise as the merging realm; and Elizabeth's ability to enter into a different side of the regular universe as the disruption of space.

Keywords: *Invisibility; magical realism; time disruptions; identity*

1. Introduction

Fantasy happens to have several branches; one of them is magical realism. According to Faris, magical realism blurs the distinction between what is real (realism) and what is fantastic (fantasy) by combining them so that the magical elements within the ordinary grow naturally (Faris, 2004: 1). Unlike the general fantasy genre in which most of its world is made new, magical realism still includes the ordinary from the real world. The important figure of this concept is Franz Roh, a German critic whose work in 1920s was popular to help develop the growth of magical realism (Bowers, 2004: 7). Way before, magical realism had a long history in which the spread of it was divided into three periods of time. The first period was in 1920s (Germany), the second period was in 1940s (Central America), and the last period was in 1955 (Latin America) and still counting up to this day (Bowers, 2004: 7). The movement in Latin America was caused by the writers who wanted to represent their complex culture by merging the ordinary and the extraordinary (Thamarana, 2015). Magical realism is often overlooked because readers do not realize the books they read might be magical realism and not just a mere fantasy. Well-known authors for their magical realism work are Gabriel Garcíá Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Haruki Murakami (*Kafka*

on the Shore), Neil Gaiman (*The Ocean at the End of the Lane*), and many more. Since there are various theories regarding this literary concept, this article uses the magical realism theory by Wendy B. Faris that provides five elements—the irreducible element, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity—to analyze the book.

Magical realism in Andrea Cremer and David Levithan's *Invisibility* (2013) tells a story about an invisible boy named Stephen. His condition happens in the middle of the real world in New York where people live their lives ordinarily. This is in line with magical realism's purpose to merge two worlds, real and fantasy. Being used to his condition, Stephen does not expect anyone, let alone a special someone, to be able to see him. His life changes when Elizabeth, an ordinary-looking girl, moves into his apartment building and becomes his new neighbor. When they meet, Elizabeth can see him like she can see anything and anyone else, so this surprises Stephen because he has been invisible his whole life, thus he does not expect to be seen. Their story begins with Stephen hiding his condition and becoming Elizabeth's friend, and then when love blooms in between them, Elizabeth finds the harsh truth that her new boyfriend is invisible due to an old curse cast by his grandfather originally for his pregnant mother at the time. One truth reveals another, leading to the fact that there is magic in Elizabeth's normal world and also people who have the capability and ability for it. Instead of leaving Stephen to deal with his problems, Elizabeth stays to figure out what happens, and along the way, she finds something about her true self. The peculiar experiences Stephen and Elizabeth go through lead to the purpose of this article which is to find the elements of magical realism through Wendy B. Faris' concept.

There are some related studies regarding magical realism in a literary work referenced in this article. The first is from Wati and Ayu's magical realism findings in the novel *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs (2013). In their article, they used Wendy B. Faris' magical realism theory which includes five elements—the irreducible element, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity—to be used for the analysis. Each element is proven present in the novel as the writers also provided examples from the book. According to Wati and Ayu, the novel had extraordinary phenomena happening in the middle of an ordinary world mixed to create an exciting storyline. One of the aspects of magical realism is the presence of events that cannot be explained logically, such as a girl who can fly, monsters, and so on (Wati & Ayu, 2019). Ishlahiyah, in her journal, analyzed love and loss through the novel *The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender* by Leslye Walton (2014), in which Wendy B. Faris' magical realism and its five elements occurred. In the findings, the author provided extraordinary things such as a character's ability to smell all things, a character's ability to communicate with deceased people, a character's change into a bird to merge the realm of humans and animals, etc. (Ishlahiyah, 2018).

2. Literature Review

Magical realism is one of the literary genres under fantasy. Magical realism, like its name, contains fantastical elements such as magic and extraordinary stuff within the story. Quoting Aljohani, "Magical realism portrays fantastical events in a realistic tone." (Aljohani, 2016). What differentiates this genre from the general fantasy genre is that magical realism is not entirely fantastical. This concept includes realism (real world) and the magic *inside* the real world. The term magical realism is most associated with Latin America, but history goes beyond that. The spread of magical realism was first set in Germany in 1920s by Franz Roh, a

German critic, whose work influenced its growth. Roh first brought up magical realism in his book *Post-Expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Most Recent European Paintings* (1925) which reveals that “magic realism” in his sense is to define a form of painting that is in contrast with other expressionist arts when it comes to its details and that it has the representation of the mystical reality (Bowers, 2004: 8).

One of the magical realism theorists is Wendy B. Faris who states in her book *Ordinary Enchantments* (2004) that the magic begins within the real world without the element of surprise from the author, and the surprise itself will be from the history of the extraordinary which can be shocking (Faris, 2004: 14). Faris’ theory regarding magical realism is supported by five characteristics of magical realism that can be used to investigate and define the concept in a literary work. The five characteristics that is applied to Andrea Cremer and David Levithan’s *Invisibility* as the main source of this research are the irreducible element, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity.

a. The Irreducible Element

This element deals with what goes beyond logic. The irreducible element cannot be explained logically and is against the law of the universe. As mentioned earlier, magical realism authors tend not to bring out an element of surprise because anything in a magical realism work is supposed to be normal although it is often abnormal. Quoting Wati and Ayu, “Irreducible magic frequently disrupts the ordinary logic of cause and effect.” (Wati & Ayu, 2019). Since the cause and effect of a certain thing in a story is disrupted and presented as if ordinary—and since common knowledge is not much necessary—readers tend to have difficulty finding evidence that something is out of place.

Moreover, the lack of evidence is also caused by events that are not explained in detail when occurring. According to Faris, the extraordinary in magical realism is written in a realistic environment that readers do not doubt or comment on (Faris, 2004: 8). For example, in the novel *Bliss* by Kathryn Littlewood (2012), Rosemary Bliss once sees her mother fold a lightning bolt into a bowl of cake batter. This event is pictured in detail for readers to absorb the atmosphere during the scene, but the reason behind the folding of a lightning bolt is not explained. The readers, therefore, choose to accept the magical reality whether it is rational or not (Faris, 2004: 8).

b. The Phenomenal World

The second characteristic is the phenomenal world which discusses the realism part of magical realism to differentiate it from the fantastic part. The phenomenal world is where the author describes a setting or situation that resembles the one we live in but with more intriguing details to show the magical part. In other words, the extraordinary part of magical realism likely takes place in the real world of the real universe. Roland Barthes states that it is essential to have a reality effect in a magical realism work in order to give the readers an idea that the story is real (Roland Barthes in Faris, 2004: 14). Roh also indicates that mystery in magical realism does not descend into the represented world but rather hides and pulsates behind it (Franz Roh in Faris, 2004: 15).

c. Unsettling Doubts

The third element is unsettling doubts. Faris describes it as some sort of hesitations that readers would have before accepting the irreducible elements (Faris, 2004: 16). This

third characteristic links to the first one, the irreducible element, since this characteristic deals with how readers take the story they read. For books that go globally, those works may have readers from all over the world, and sometimes traditions and cultures make the content of the books difficult to be accepted. As Faris states in the book, belief systems differ from one place to another, hence the doubts come before acceptance (Faris, 2004: 16). The audience that is not familiar with the concept of magic or fantasy often denies the extraordinary and thinks that it is only a dream whenever magic occurs. The strategy for this is usually for authors to describe the magic as clearly as possible or for authors to make their narratives seem like allegories. Faris also states that magical realism is about a fictional reality that we see as something extraordinary in the real world (Faris, 2004: 17). Although readers tend to have their own interpretations, a certain narrative from the author emphasizing the magic will help them stay on track.

d. Merging Realms

The fourth element is merging realms. Like its name, merging realms means merging the real and magical worlds. This characteristic, when described in detail, will get readers to feel the connection between the ordinary world and the extraordinary one combined. Merging realms, in one way or another, has the same focus as the phenomenal world in which to resemble the real world we live in. Marie Darrieussecq sees merging realms as something like a contemporary life that anything in it can be possible, like living in a suburb where anything can happen (Marie Darrieussecq in Faris, 2004: 21). Marie's concept can be the symbol that regards magical realism that allows the strangeness of blending fantasy with reality. Brian McHale describes it as another world that infiltrates our world or the representatives of our world that infiltrates the outer world (Brian McHale in Faris, 2004: 21). Culturally, merging realms usually involves combining traditional (ancient) and modern worlds (Faris, 2004: 21). The term "traditional" can be about developed myths to be fantastical stories. This is in line with what André Breton states that magical realism is no longer about what is real or what is the imaginary, but rather it can be about what is on the other side of reality (André Breton in Faris, 2004: 22).

e. Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity

The last characteristic of magical realism by Wendy B. Faris is the disruptions of time, space, and identity. In magical realism, time, space, and identity are often too absurd and the changes are too sudden to be seen as realistic. Narratives for magical realism are distinguishable as they include cultural hybridity, and these elements also expand for characterizations (Faris, 2004: 25). As Siddiq states in his article, magical realism creates and changes what is ordinary to be extraordinary, and vice versa (Siddiq, 2018). This is in line with what Fredric Jameson explains that new space and new temporality happen because the older forms of sacred space are replaced by something more modern or new in realism (Fredric Jameson in Faris, 2004: 23). As known, nowadays in modern life, nothing is impossible. This can be one of the reasons why magical events are accepted within realism, and why the doubts regarding the magical aspects are eventually faded. Faris also includes some examples to prove the disruption of time and space, one of them is an excerpt from Fuentes's *Aura* in which there is a scene where a character named Felipe notices the difference between the crowded street outside with the damp and moldy room of Consuelo's house as he enters (Faris, 2004: 24). As for the disruption of identity, Siddiq puts

it as the fusion of identities that characters can develop into something unbelievable in magical realism (Siddiq, 2018).

3. Research Method

In order to fulfill the purpose of this research, the magical realism theory by Wendy B. Faris is applied. Faris' concept of magical realism provides five elements, which are the irreducible element, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and the disruptions of time, space, and identity. These elements are used to analyze what the characters from the novel *Invisibility* go through. The sources provided for the analysis consists of novel, textbooks, journal articles, and web reviews. The technique in collecting the data is by reading, interpreting, and analyzing said sources comprehensively. The analysis is done by gathering examples from the novel to be examined while applying each of the five elements of magical realism as the evidence of the study.

4. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the results gathered from the analysis. The expectation for the results is to find the representation of magical realism in the novel *Invisibility* by Andrea Cremer and David Levithan. There are five elements of magical realism by Wendy B. Faris found in the book.

a. The Irreducible Element

This element deals with something out of the ordinary that cannot be explained with logic. Faris puts it as something common, in which what seems to be abnormal does happen in the real world (Faris, 2004: 8). In Cremer and Levithan's *Invisibility*, Elizabeth, the main female character, witnesses her new neighbor, Stephen, disappear right in front of her face. In truth, Stephen is not disappeared, but his form merely flickers due to his invisible self. No one is supposed to be able to see him except Elizabeth, and this event happens in the earliest stage of their relationship, so it makes sense that what Elizabeth witnesses is just her adjusting.

He closes his eyes, and when he does, something weird happens. It's like I blinked, but I know I didn't. He disappeared, in the way someone slips out of your peripheral vision. But I'm not looking at him out of the corner of my eye. He's standing right in front of me. (16)

In what follows, Elizabeth's point of view is explained clearly, but the reason or cause behind it is not. What she goes through cannot be accepted by logic, considering someone cannot just be gone out of sight suddenly. Stephen is not really disappeared, it is just Elizabeth's mind playing tricks on her since Stephen is invisible and Elizabeth is the only one who can see him—so this is Elizabeth adapting since in this scene, she still has no idea what is going on with Stephen.

All of our conversations were, in some way, about me. But with Elizabeth, I lose that tether. My thoughts are free to think only her. But if my thoughts go too far, then my body, left to its own devices, loses its ability to touch, to hold, to stay. (72)

Although Stephen is invisible, he can make others acknowledge his presence by making his body solid so that he can be touched. However, to succeed, he has to put much

effort into the attempt, otherwise his form will vanish into thin air. In this narrative, Stephen tells the readers that his relationship with Elizabeth is healthy in some way because both of them can focus on one another. Stephen is not used to it since his invisibility situation is primarily the main topic of conversations, but with Elizabeth, they can talk about anything else. What Stephen thinks as an "improvement" in his life comes with a side effect. In order to be present for Elizabeth and those who know about his condition, as mentioned earlier, Stephen has to concentrate hard to stay solid.

b. The Phenomenal World

The phenomenal world involves realistic descriptions to make a fictional world that is much likely similar to the one we live in but with extraordinary details. According to Wati and Ayu, the realistic setting and the odd occurring are intertwined to make sense for the readers (Wati & Ayu, 2019). Stephen's life introduction tells the readers how he lives normally under a strange circumstance which is him being invisible. Although contradicting, he can be invisible and live his daily life as if he is as ordinary as everyone else.

New York City is a remarkably easy place to be invisible, as long as you have an absent father who contributes to your bank account from time to time. Everything—groceries, movies, books, furniture—can be ordered online. Cash never has to pass from one hand to another. Packages are left outside the door. (2)

Stephen, in his narration, describes the easy life he experiences in New York where everything can be done without making physical contact. Although people can't see him, Stephen is able to make his body solid so that he can be felt or touched by those around him, that is why he accepts his condition because he does not have to deal with it directly. Living in New York, where everybody minds their own business, comes as an advantage for him since Stephen can pretend that he is just a teenage boy who does not have a mysterious problem. The image of modern-day New York that is present in the book successfully portrays the element of the phenomenal world.

I glance around the café. Even in this tiny space, the few occupants are hunkered over their laptops. Or frantically texting. The staff are huddled near the espresso machine. Each face in the coffee shop is blanched with fear. No one is certain what's happened. (298)

As described, the phenomenal world deals with the resemblance of the extraordinary world with the ordinary one—or the one we live in. Since the setting takes place in a café, it perfectly pictures the real world the characters live in. The context behind this scene is that people in New York are afraid of the sudden terror caused by Stephen's grandfather, Arbus. Arbus comes to the city to hurt the citizens to get Stephen's attention. The bizarre occurrences in New York make people anxious, and this scene nicely portrays the situation inside the ordinary café where people deal with extraordinary problems.

c. Unsettling Doubts

Before recognizing and differentiating what is irreducible and reducible, experiencing unsettling doubts comes first. Through this element, authors can make readers hesitant about what they believe in. Since there are differences in belief systems and cultures,

readers tend to be doubtful about what they read (Faris, 2004: 17). In *Invisibility*, not only do readers have doubts about what is going on, but also the characters involved.

Oogly-eyed, goofy-grin romance aside, I'm uneasy. And this restlessness isn't the kind that's a natural partner to fear of rejection. The sense of something amiss creeps up when we're apart. I try to ignore it, pretending that I don't notice the flickering of doubt in my peripheral vision. But it's there and it's getting harder to shrug it off. (87)

One of the characteristics of unsettling doubts is that sometimes the fantasy part is described clearly by the author. In this case, using Elizabeth's narrative, she realizes that something is off with her relationship and Stephen. Since Stephen is invisible, his reflection cannot be caught by any medium, even a mirror or camera. Elizabeth's constant wariness about her peripheral vision whenever Stephen is around proves that she doubts Stephen's form. Furthermore, the fact that sometimes Stephen cannot always hold himself solid does not help to convince Elizabeth that Stephen is indeed normal. However, since at this point the doubt still does not make sense for Elizabeth, she is not curious much.

"It's just that I have no experience with... well, magic, I guess."

Millie groans. "Magic! Now, there's an abused word. What we do is as much a part of a system as physics or chemistry or biology. It's just much less... public. It has to be. If you don't mind understand that now, you soon will." She pauses, sighs again. "I see we will have to start at the most basic level." (149)

The topic of magic is considered taboo when discussed with people who do not believe in it. Readers alongside characters who have yet to find out about Stephen's family history are wondering about certain fantastical things, one of them is magic. To normal people, the only reasonable explanation for Stephen's situation is magic. But turns out, Millie—a spellseeker, a term for someone who can see spells and curses cast by those with the ability—describes what they do is not far away from science, which is even more confusing. This creates unsettling doubts for both readers and characters it is impossible for science to produce spells and curses in their mundane world.

d. Merging Realms

According to Faris, merging realms is the experience of the closeness of the merging worlds (Faris, 2004: 21). The extraordinary part of magical realism allows authors to create a completely fictional world, and how it merges with reality is to insert ordinary things that usually happen in the real world. In *Invisibility*, the aspect of the merging realm is shown by the usual things the characters do in the modern real world, and behind the usual stuff, magic exists.

The first thing that hits me is the mixture of scents. One is familiar and among my favorites. I'm sure more than one person would call me crazy for claiming to love the smell of comics, but I do. They smell shiny and fresh. That scent would have calmed me if not for the others swirling in the shadowed space. Some I think I recognize: rosemary, melted wax. Others are exotic and so heavy I get a little dizzy.

It's definitely a shop. I can't wrap my head around the welcome sight of bins full of comics that I'd happily spend hours rifling through juxtaposed with the heavy velvet curtains covering the windows and the rows of burning candles on shelves that ring the room. (141)

I can feel things shifting. My whole relationship to the world is shifting. I thought it was all pretty straightforward, all observable at one point or another. But now it seems that I was wrong. There is a world I didn't know within the world I know. And Millie, it appears, is its emissary.

The room she takes us to is lined with bookshelves on every wall. A private library... but something is off. At first I don't realize what's so disconcerting about it, and then I notice: none of the books have writing on their spines. It's an anonymous library. Or maybe a library I can't read. (144)

These two scenes represent the merging realms component. Here, Elizabeth is about to meet a special someone who might have the cure for Stephen's curse. Later in the book, this "special someone" is revealed as Millie, a spellseeker whose skills are to detect curses and spells. For mortals, Millie is just an owner of a comic store. Something as general as comics might seem odd to exist in a magical world, but with the magical realism concept where anything is possible, comics are considered normal. Elizabeth also describes the vibes of the store, such as the smell and the environment. The comic displays, melted wax, rosemary scent, velvet curtains are all common in the real world. But as Elizabeth figures that the shop may have a secret room, the merging of the two worlds begins. The secret room happens to be Millie's "office" where she keeps books about the whole curses and spells stuff—Millie herself refuses to call it "magic" since this is just science to her kind.

In the room—or what Elizabeth puts it as an anonymous library since the spines of the books have no writing—she feels the world shifts as if some foreign energy exists in there only. At this point, she has realized that Millie is different and that supernatural things might be real. Millie herself goes straight to the point by asking Elizabeth about her true identity, although the girl is still oblivious about it. Their conversation revolves around cursecasters, spellcasters, spellseekers, Stephen's condition, and Elizabeth's true identity—and all along the normal world outside is forgotten for a moment. This proves that merging realms is not out of the possibility in this novel as a part of magical realism concept.

e. Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity

Magical realism disrupts the concept of time, space, and identity. The disruption may play tricks on readers' mind because it also connects to the irreducible element that makes no sense. In *Invisibility*, the disruption is caused by magic that lies under New York City. Elizabeth with her new-found talent discovers that places and people in New York are most likely to be under a spell or curse, with an example below:

I take a deep breath and try to do again what I did with Millie. I concentrate while I let the world fall away. I can't let the blaring horns on the street or the hardness of the pavement or even the breeze pull me back into the moment. My vision gets slightly blurred. And I go there.

I don't know where it is. Even in the couple of times I've managed to do it, I'm not sure what it is. I've started to think about it as "the background." It's like the regular universe that I live in is still there, but I can see what's going on behind the scenes. And behind the scenes is where the magic lives.

Despite the wavering quality of the scene before me, I worry it's not working. I can't feel or see anything different about the people around me. Then I notice the woman at the curb. At first I sense the energy around her. It's choppy, like static. I draw another slow breath and try to withdraw even further into the background. That's when the static takes shape. It hovers around her like the shadows I sketched, amorphous, always moving, full of a life of their own. Living spells. I can see particles falling around her like bits of straw. And it's not good. I'm beginning to grasp the mechanics of controlling my ability to see curses. I don't think I like it. (161-162)

When Elizabeth finally accepts her identity, a spellseeker and the skills that she possesses because of it, she starts her journey by practicing her new talent. Since there are cursecasters, spellcasters, and spellseekers in New York, she figures that those powerful people must have done something in the city. She tries to pull herself deep into the layers of the real world and find out that there is indeed a different scene of this universe that she calls "the background." The background is some sort of a different dimension that only people like her can see. The background allows her to see the tangles of curses and spells around places and people, hence in the example above she can sense the odd energy surrounding a random woman she sees on the street. She also describes the shape of the energy, in which according to her, the thing seems like having a life of its own. Siddiq (2018), in his journal about the fluidity of time, space, and identity, implies that these three disruptions highlight the ordinary as extraordinary and vice versa, thus this scene from the book is one of the ideal examples of disruption of space aspect since Elizabeth jumps from one space to another—the reality and "the background."

5. Conclusion

The study of the novel *Invisibility* by Andrea Cremer and David Levithan using the concept of magical realism by Wendy B. Faris proves that the five elements of magical realism such as the irreducible element, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity are present in the book. These elements show the characters' experiences of living within what is considered to be a magical realism world where something extraordinary blends into what is ordinary. Stephen, an invisible boy who is cursed by his evil grandfather, has a relationship with an ordinary-looking girl, Elizabeth. She turns out to be not-so-ordinary—apparently she is a spellseeker—and in the end, she helps Stephen go against his grandfather. The irreducible element of magical realism that occurs in the book shows how at first, Elizabeth could not explain Stephen's inability to stay solid, hence a difficulty on his part to stay visible to her. The phenomenal world in the book happens when Stephen is able to live his life normally in New York. The phenomenal world itself deals with the resemblance of an extraordinary world with the ordinary one we live in. Nothing in Stephen's life is normal, but since he is invisible and lives in a free place such as New York where most people are careless to one another, he could live peacefully. Unsettling doubts come twice: first, when Elizabeth doubts her relationship

with Stephen since she has no idea about Stephen's condition; second, when the readers are made doubtful about Millie's reference to magic as science, which ultimately, the narrative leads the readers to move on. Merging realms occurs when Millie conceals her true identity—a spellseeker—as a comic store owner, which is very mundane considering her true job is far from ordinary. Elizabeth learning about her skills such as going to “the background” to see layers of curses and spells under New York is one of the examples of space disruption.

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