

**MAGICAL REALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY IN BEN OKRI'S
“EVERY LEAF A HALLELUJAH”**

By

Folashade Ichenwo

Department of Planning, Research and Statistics,

NCCE-Abuja

08065644457

Shadebliss2@gmail.com

&

Sodiq Abubakar Muhammed

University of Ibadan, Ibadan

Email: Smuhammed9467@stu.ui.edu.ng

08118418254

Abstract

In the rapidly deteriorating environment, magical realism as a fictional genre offers a valuable means of representing environmental consciousness. While magical realism may seem to embody fantasy, it actually contributes significantly in understanding our reality. Environmental advocacy is necessary for both the sustenance of the environment and the human race. Humans are responsible for the environmental depletion and ecological crisis which is rapidly unfolding before us, urgently demanding a shift in perception towards our environment. This study examines the role of magical realism in advocating environmental change in Ben Okri's novel, Every Leaf a Hallelujah. Using eco-criticism as the theoretical framework, the study explores how magical realism, as a literary technique, is deployed in the novel to create a mindset shift in how humans view their environment. Through a textual analysis, it is revealed that this technique, influences the plot, characterization, settings (in time and space), language, and other aspects of the novel to highlight the relevance of the environment to humans. Particularly, there are instances where non-human objects are personified, time is disrupted, sicknesses, pestilences, harsh weather condition are used as symbols of ecological judgment, a magical flower becomes a symbol of survival, the intersection of the realms of the physical and spiritual, and other elements of magic are infused to create environmental consciousness, advocate environmental change, raise ethical issues, and influence a change in human outlook towards their environment, which is vital for their survival.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Environmental Advocacy, Eco-criticism

Introduction

The gradual collapse of the ecology has underscored the urgent need to reframe human perception towards the ecology, while much has been said, more action is required for earth's survival. The gospel of ecological sustainability is one that must continue to effect a gradual overhaul to the deteriorating environment. Indeed, the environment is experiencing a great loss. Wooster (1998) aptly puts it, the global crisis before us is not a natural consequence of how the ecosystems functions "but rather of how our ethical systems function." For humans to navigate this crisis, it is pertinent to understand our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but more importantly, to recognise those ethical ways to reform them. Merely expressing the anxiety of this global crisis is insufficient to change the state of things: "we need physical and intellectual activity to repair it," to close the wide margin which humans have created with their environment, "we need a new kind of thought, 'global reparative thinking,' an interconnectedness, interdisciplinary way of thinking and feeling" (Mazumdar 2013). This is crucial because the depletion of natural life poses an existential risk to all life forms on earth.

We need to unveil ourselves to behold the ravaging effect of rapidly advancing technology and the civilization we espouse. The neck-breaking speed of modern technological progress is a pressing concern, as the claimed "advancement" reduces natural life to a minimal existence. Environmental crises demand swift response and must be treated with utmost seriousness, as they directly impact human well-being. The fact remains that whether we come to this realization or not, "we are now engaged in an epic battle to right the balance of our earth" (Al Gore, 2006). However, we can only right our wrongs when two-thirds of humanity comes to the realization that our environment must be tended with care. A change in our outlook towards the environment will happen when we are driven by the knowledge that there is a dire danger when we neglect our role in persevering the ecology. Similar to other Eco-critics, Al Gore is convinced that the hyped modern civilisation is driving humanity to a cul de sac, a dead end. This civilisation has reeled us to a critical juncture, necessitating urgent attention to the situation at hand. It is not a fiction that the modern civilisation, once hailed by humanity, is responsible for the deteriorating environment, the current environmental crisis, and the impending catastrophes. In his book *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*, Al Gore (2006) confirms this, stating that "...modern civilization...is colliding violently with our planet's ecological system" and the height of this violence against the earth is breathtaking. It is not surprising that the harsh consequences of environmental pollution and exploitation are unleashing rapidly.

Ironically, what humans have once believed in now collides with nature, which sustains human life. In his text *Postmodernity and the Environmental Crisis*, Gare (1995) questions modern civilization, which is rapidly diminishing the state of the environment, asking, "How could this have happened? How can the central principle which has dominated civilization for two and half millennia and which has inspired that civilization to dominate the world, dissolve into nothingness..." This civilization has proven to be detrimental to natural life, causing more harm than good. We have long exploited the environment to the point that nature is extremely stripped of its value, reduced to a material resource commodity (Heise, 2006). This mindset will ultimately create an emptiness in human life, as nature, the source of human survival, is extremely exploited. Writers, in several ways, have advocated the conservation of the natural

habitat and continue to urge humans to change their attitude towards the environment. This environmental advocacy has also found its way into magical realist fiction.

Magical realism has emerged as a significant trend in advocating a sustainable development. While magical realist fiction has addressed various issues affecting our society, it has also played an important role in promoting ecological sustainability. According to Bowers (2004), magical realism is a mode of fictional narrative that “relies upon the presentation of real, imagined and magical elements as if they were real.” This blending of fantasy and reality makes it challenging to distinguish between what is fantastic or real. Writers adopting this tradition have largely employed modernist techniques, such as disrupting linear narrative and also questioning history. Faris, in his text *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Demystifications of Narrative* (2004), identifies the five primary characteristics of magical realism to include: the irreducible elements of magic, unsettling doubts, the phenomenal world, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space and identity.

The origin of magical realism has long been debated by scholars. While some argue that it is associated with the marginal cultures, predominantly the literature of the colonised, others see it as a “universal aesthetic that unveils the supernatural core of the real anywhere” (Siskind, 2012). The term “magical realism” was first applied in 1925 to painting by Franz Roh in his essay “Magic Realism; Post-Expressionism”. Roh believes that *Magischer Realismus*, as he termed it, describes the artistic works of the German painters who attempted to “reconcile the referentiality of impressionism with the expressionist attempt to uncover the spiritual and mystical nucleus of reality” (Siskind, 2012). A few years later, a formula as regards this concept was proposed by Massimo Bontempelli who founded the influential journal *900 (Novecento)*. Bontempelli urged European writers to tilt towards the traditional myths and archetypes in order to renovate literature. The term was introduced into Latin American literature by historian and critic Miguel Angel Asturias, who popularised it when he applied it to fiction in his 1967 novel *Men of Maize*, along with Alejo Carpentier, and Arturo Uslar-Pietri. They developed this concept based on the hybrid nature of Latin American culture. Another prominent work which has also become associated with the term magical realism is the novel of Gabriel Garcia Marquez which he titled *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Bhabha (1990) argues that magical realism is “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world.” This perception of magical realism as a postcolonial reaction became popular with Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children* (1981) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).

The nomenclature “magical realism” is often rejected by African writers whose works bear similarities to this tradition. Their reasoning stems from the fact that the term “implies the slavish imitation of Latin American” (Cooper, 1998). European writers claim to have developed the concept, creating the impression that local knowledge, beliefs, language, and rhetoric cannot emerge from Africa. In order to dispute the stereotype that nothing new, both intellectually and spiritual, has emerged from Africa, these writers reject the term “magical realism” (as it is a Western coinage) to express their own understanding of the world. For African writers, the origin of African strand of magical realism can be traced back to the rich oral history. The writings of early African writers such as D.O Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola,

and more recent generation such as Kofi Laing, Syl Cheney-Coker, and Ben Okri, among others have been inspired by this rich history which they have experimented in their narratives.

Engaging an environmentalist fiction allows one find answers to the following questions: “How is nature represented in the novel? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of the novel? Are the values expressed in the work consistent with ecological wisdom?” (Glofelty and Fromm, 1996). The environment itself, from an ecocritical thought, is all encompassing. It extends beyond plants and animals to include all ecosystems (Ozgon and Ararguc, 2021). Ecocritical theory, which underpins this analysis, interrogates the interconnectedness between humans and nature. However, an ecocritical study would do more than analysing human interconnectedness with nature to examine ethical issues, and how humans perceive their environment. Against the backdrop of this study, this work attempts to examine magical realism as a technique in advocating change in human perception of the environment and promoting sustainable development, as foregrounded in Ben Okri’s *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*.

Synopsis of Ben Okri’s *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*

Mangoshi, a brave seven-year-old girl, journeys into the forest in search of a magical flower to heal her dying mother and save her entire village from its present predicament. Her village is plagued with strange sicknesses, dwindling harvest, scorching heat, and several issues. During her first journey into the forest, she encounters a series of strange happenings. Mysterious voices speak to her as she searches for the magical flower. She is fortunate to get the flower, however, she loses it on her way back due to the distracting movement of trees. A year later, Mangoshi’s mother’s condition worsens, and the strange happenings in her village persist. The villagers consult the Wise One, who reveals that Mangoshi is the only one who can rescue them from their current agony. Despite her mother’s refusal to let her go, Mangoshi’s father summons the courage to release his daughter to embark on the journey once again.

As she ventures into the dense forest, she notices a drastic change which has devastated the flora and fauna. Continuing on her movement, she encounters a dying tree which speaks to her, recalling her first visit to the forest. She shares her mission with the tree and expresses her sorrow over the present state of the forest. She is advised to move deeper into the forest so that the old and big trees will proffer a solution for her. Proceeding, she comes in contact with the Baobab Tree, which transports her to another world in time past, revealing how the magnificent the forest has once been before humans tamed it. As she returns to reality, the present time, she encounters tree cutters armed with chainsaws and other big machinery to fell more trees in the forest. Mangoshi bravely revolts against them, saving the trees from destruction and the forest from being tamed again. In exchange for this kind act, she receives the coveted healing flower. This flower ultimately heals her mother and saves the entire village from their predicament.

Magical Realism as a Technique for Environmental Revival in Ben Okri’s *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*

Environmental advocacy is a recurring theme in contemporary fiction, as humanity has not seized in ravaging other life forms on earth. In the novel understudy, the urgent need for earth’s revival prompts the novelist to create a narrative whereby the forest speaks for itself, revealing

the damage humans have inflicted upon it. The magical element in Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* amplifies the clamouring of the environmentalist, seeking to change our world view towards natural life. For too long, we have ravaged the forests, polluted water, depleted the ozone layer, and hunted down plants and animals that sustain life. This brutalization of natural life has persisted for years. The author, through the blend of fantasy and realism, advocates a sustainable development, where the environment and all natural life are valued and cherished.

In the novel, the plight of the forest and nature in general is vehemently lamented by the trees. The trees are portrayed as characters in the narrative. They are personified to voice out their plight to remind humans of the danger of environmental destruction. The novel emphasizes the need for a change in our worldview, as humans' destructive attitude to natural life is rapidly increasing, leading to ecological fallout. The village where Mangoshi, the main character, dwells has contributed to the destruction of their forest life, with bushes burnt down, trees countlessly felled for economic reasons, and animals hunted down for human consumption. The villagers are reminded that they have caused damage to the planetary when they start noticing changes, "their harvests grew poorer, and they had less to eat. Strange animals appeared in the village. It became scorching in the daytime. Then, people began falling ill, and no one knew where the illness came from" (Okri, 2021).

Not until their lives were at stake, the villagers never care how they treat their environment. They were woken up by the affliction which they have brought upon themselves and forced to look inward for a solution to their present condition. Metaphorically, a flower becomes the way out of the pestilence. The trees in the forest, capable of speaking their minds, express how they are treated by humans, how humans exploit and value the environment only for economic reasons. The once-thriving forest, 'was usually noisy, with bird calls, animal grunts, and the fizzing of insects', has now become too quiet as most of the animals that once made it bustling have been consumed by man. During Mangoshi's first visit to the forest in search of the magical flower, the trees were scared of associating with her, doubting her intention in the forest. As the trees conversed, it was evident that they had concluded that Mangoshi was not different from other humans who were less concerned about the state of the forest. They literally assume that she has come to add to their pain. The trees have, for too long, feel exiled from existence due to human ignorance and exploitation. However, the irony becomes the case when Mangoshi sought a magical flower which the Wise One said would rescue them from their present predicament. This fantasy is a technique which highlights the novelist's message that human survival depends on nature, including plants, animals, which humans have long rendered useless and disregarded except for economic reasons.

The situation of the villagers in the home town where Mangoshi, the little girl, lives is not far fetched from the present reality we experience. Okri personifies trees, giving them a voice to speak up against their tyrant rulers, humans. The trees discuss among themselves about Mangoshi who has come in search of the magical flower, saying, "Let us wait and see what she is made of. It has to be the right person. It will be wasted if she is not the right person" (Okri, 2021). The trees are uncertain of Mangoshi's visit to the forest, afraid to narrate their ordeal with her, as they do not know if she would value their existence. Many at times, humans have

disregarded them, leaving them indifferent about Mangoshi's visit. The forest appears mystic to Mangoshi during her first visit, she is bewildered by the strange movement of trees and the whisperings. The trees had "strange look," she hears sound from the root as "she pressed her ear to the earth". Although, she is unsure of the whispering she hears, "it was as if the forest itself was trying to confuse her, for every path she took led deeper into the forest where she saw trees she had never seen before" (Okri, 2021). Her first visit to the forest ends futile, as she fails to bring home the magical flower. The mysterious forest manipulates her to losing the flower, making her question her own perception. She is thrown into doubt as a result whether all that she witnesses is real or a product of her own thoughts. Not until she arrived home, she never remember holding the magical flower.

A year after, when the trouble worsens, her mother's health rapidly deteriorate and sicknesses overwhelm the village. Pestilence pervade the entire atmosphere, reminding the people that their hope depends on the magical flower. As they make consultation, "the wise man of the village" reminds them that "only the particular flower which lived in the heart of the forest" could cure Mangoshi's mother and revive the entire village – "the same flower Mangoshi had failed to bring back the year before" (Okri, 2021). The novelist, through these scenarios, highlights the fact that humans are in trouble if they fail to retrace their steps in creating a world where the environment is placed on a high pedestal rather than being exploited. Through his character, Mangoshi's father, he makes this stern warning to humans. Mangoshi father speaks to his daughter before she visits the forest the second time in search of the magical flower. He plainly tells her that "You will see for yourself. The world has changed. We are all in trouble". The reason for this ugly remark is that "Human beings have not been good to the Earth". And this would even cause more trouble for her as she visit the enraged forest which humans have always disregarded.

In his warnings, he informs her that "The forest is not the same forest you went to before" (Okri, 2021). Within a year Mangoshi visited the forest, much has changed. Her father is aware that it would become more difficult this time for her, that the journey will be more challenging and that there is high tendency that she would get lost. However, she would only be able to survive the adventure if she is able to bring home the flower which would not only save her dying mother but the entire village. The horrible state of the forest becomes glaring to Mangoshi as she starts her journey in search of the magical flower: "She was surprised at what she saw: the dryness, the ash of vines, the broken Earth. Trees had been uprooted, and many had been cut, and their broken trunks lay among their resplendent branches on cracked Earth" (p. 39). The imagery the writer paints in this scene provide clues in understanding the level at which our environment is being degraded.

Mangoshi symbolises a new generation, a reconciliation between the environment and the older generation that initiated the industrial and technological revolution, causing plants and animals to suffer loss. Her mother, now suffering from a severe sickness, symbolises the older generation that refuse to acknowledge the vitality of the environment and neglect the fight to sustain it. She represents the older generation that has forgotten their role in preserving and tendering the earth. Her mother acknowledges her failure to help the dying forest when it

beckons on her, confessing to her daughter, “When I was your age, something called me and asked for my help. However, I did not go. I did not help” (Okri, 2021). Her environment pleads with her all her life to rescue it from its present condition, but she fails to carry out this task. Now, there is downturn in her health as strange sickness befalls her. The responsibility she has failed to carry out has been passed to her daughter who is a more recent generation. What called her when she was much younger has now called her daughter again, but she is not willing to let go of her as she is not certain of what might happen in the mystic forest.

Against all odds, Mangoshi takes up the mantle to rescue her people, who have failed to treat their environment with care. The forest she visits becomes increasingly mysterious and enraged due the level of destruction which humans have brought upon it. While in the forest, Mangoshi “felt in the air a great suffering. She heard it first as a terrible cry.” She tries to find out what it was but she “could not see where the cry was coming from. It sounded like a woman’s cry” (Okri, 2021). This mysterious happening in the forest is a metaphor for the gross despoliation which the forest has witnessed. Eventually, Mangoshi strikes a conversation with a Baobab tree, which enlightens her about the reason behind the mystical happenings she experiences. The Baobab tree transports Mangoshi to another realm where she experiences nature in its pristine state. It enlightens her about the usefulness of the trees: “We hold the earth together. We are the link between heaven and earth. We give the earth the air humans breathe... We have the healing power. We are older than the human race” (Okri, 2021). Again, Okri personifies the trees, he lends a voice them so that they can express their plight. They overtly speak their minds, making it known that humans have always been their greatest enemies, despite all the benefits they provide. The conversation between Mangoshi and a fallen tree speaks volume of the long suffering the forest has experienced. In the face of this adversity, human continue to sap every good the forest has for their benefit. The innocent Mangoshi questions the fallen tree, saying:

“...tell me what happened to you. Why are you fallen?”

“Human beings came and cut me down.”

“But why?”

“To sell me and make money.”

“But if they do that, there will be no forest left.”

“I know. They do not know what terrible troubles they are causing.”

“I am sorry this has been done to you.”

“Do not be sorry. Do something. Talk to older trees. Go on into the forest.”

“Thank you. I will.” (Okri, 2021)

This conversation reveals the level of destruction inflicted upon the natural environment. Other instances of environmental issues are raised in the text, including the depletion of the Amazon rain forest, which provides two-third of the oxygen man needs to survive on Earth. The current state of the forest is alarming, the narrator mentions that the Amazon has now become “the

most prominent tree graveyard in the world,” in contrast, “Many years ago, this place had forests so vast that they filled a continent. They helped the Earth to survive. However, they have been burning and cutting down trees at such a terrible rate that there is almost no forest left” (Okri, 2021). Apart from highlighting some of the destructive things humans have done to the forest life, the novelist also mentions the fact that there are repercussions for this human carelessness. The conversation between the Baobab and Mangoshi clearly outlines the repercussions of the environment degradation on man, explicitly emphasising ecological justice:

“What will happen to the world?”
“They give the world the air that we breathe. The more people destroy them, the less air there will be for the world. Do you know what will happen if there are no trees in the world?”
“There will be no human beings.”
“Really?”
“Yes, human beings need trees. When they cut down forests, they are cutting down your future?”
“It is terrible! Do people not know?”
“They cannot know.” Said the eldest tree, “or they would not be doing what they are doing.” (Okri, 2021)

While in the other realm, which the Baobab magically transports her to, the little girl Mangoshi is exposed to a wealth of knowledge on environmental issues. Her understanding about the usefulness of trees is broadened, most especially, on the immense value of the forest to mankind. The Baobab enlightens Mangoshi how useful the trees are and the immense contribution they bring to all life forms on earth by saying, “take me for example. Every part of me is useful. My leaves and bark are healing medicine. My fruits are nutritious. My roots can cure many unknown diseases...A tree is just like a human” (Okri, 2021). Mangoshi requests to be taken back to the human world after she has spent a couple of hours in the world of the trees. It is at this point she encounters group of men who are the enemies of the forest. She questions them saying:

“What are you doing?” Mangoshi asked
“We have come to cut down tree,” he said, pointing at the baobab
“Why do you want to cut it down?”
“You are a child. You do not understand these things,” said the man.
“I understand that you want to kill this tree for no good reason, and I

*will not let you.” Said Mangoshi.
(Okri, 2021)*

Mangoshi boldly challenges the men to stop killing the forest life, but their leader orders her capture. As they attempt to carry Mangoshi, they encounter her magical power which leaves them in disbelief: “The first man who touched her was so deafened by her screams that he dropped her and ran away. When she screamed she seemed twice as big”. This strange girl becomes a threat to their lives, and “The tree cutters did not know what to do with this strange child who seemed to have doubled in size” (Okri, 2021). Mangoshi harnesses her mysterious power to overcome the tree cutters, protect the trees, and the entire forest. Ultimately, she receives the magical flower as a gift from the trees she had protected and is able to revive her dying mother and village from their predicament.

Conclusion

Ben Okri’s *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* establishes the notion that “A tree is just like human...We are each very different” (Okri, 2021). The novel raises environmental awareness and advocates the preservation of the environment, including plants, animals, and the entire ecosystem. By blending magic and reality, the author captures the essence of our environment and urges us to rescue the dying earth from the continuous exploitation and extreme degradation. Humans are made to recognise that there are consequences to the careless despoliation of the environment. Trees are personified and also mystically represented in the novel to emphasize their importance to mankind. The text presents that there is a wide margin, a significant disconnect, between humans and their environment, and this is exemplified through the infliction of pestilence and environmental crisis in the village where Mangoshi hails from. Metaphorically, this village represents our world which needs to redefine its ethical and cultural practices to consider the relevance of the environment to human existence. The magical flower which Mangoshi searches for represents the value that nature provides. Mangoshi herself is a symbol of a new generation of environmental advocates that must spring forth for the environment to survive and for humans to be rescued from the harsh impending environmental crisis. The plot, settings and characterization of the narrative embody magical realistic elements, deployed to advocate environmental preservation and sustenance.

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