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The Use of Magical Realism and Fantastical Elements in Contemporary Urban Fiction of Zadie Smith

Namana Ashok

Katikatala Raja Manikyam

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9226-555X>

Corresponding Author: Namana Ashok, Research Scholar, Department of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, ashoknamana11@gmail.com

Co-author: Katikatala Raja Manikyam, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, rajeekatikathala@gmail.com

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Abstract

Aims: *This article explores the innovative use of magical realism and fantastical elements in Zadie Smith's contemporary urban novels, particularly NW and Swing Time. While Smith is often celebrated for her realistic portrayal of multicultural London life, this study argues that subtle incorporations of magical realism enrich her narratives.*

Methodology and Approaches: *By analyzing key surreal or fantastical moments in these novels, the article demonstrates how Smith uses magical realism not merely as a stylistic choice but as a means to challenge rigid conceptions of identity and social boundaries. Drawing on postcolonial theory and cultural studies, this study situates Smith's use of magical realism within broader discussions of diaspora, migration, and cultural hybridity.*

Outcome: *Magical realism, traditionally associated with Latin American literature, is here adapted to the urban, multicultural settings of Smith's work, creating a hybrid form that blends the mundane with the extraordinary.*

Conclusion and suggestions: *Additionally, the article examines the social and political implications of magical realism in Smith's fiction, showing how it critiques contemporary issues such as racial inequality, economic disparity, and gender dynamics.*

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Particularly in London's multicultural context, Zadie Smith's books *NW* (2012) and *Swing Time* (2016) are highly commended for their realistic, vivid depictions of modern urban life. Underneath their superficial realism, though, these pieces gently blend magical realism and the surreal to enhance their investigation of social dynamics, community, and identity. Through authors like Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende, magical realism—a literary style that combines the everyday with the spectacular—has long been connected with Latin American literature. But its ideas have now found expression in global urban fiction, a useful instrument to communicate the difficult reality of multicultural, diasporic life. Magical realism results from "the marvellous real," inherent in the daily, as Alejo Carpentier memorably pointed out (Carpentier 25). Though rooted in reality, Smith's urban settings also show times when the unusual disturbs and reorders normal life.

Moments of surreal intensity, for instance, punctuate the story in *NW*, when Leah suddenly, dreamlike detachment during a difficult encounter: "Everything felt unreal, like the city had shifted beneath her feet" (Smith, *NW* 173). These fanciful details draw attention to the shattered sense of self the protagonists have among cultural dislocation and socioeconomic demands. In *Swing Time*, too, the narrator's experiences often verge on the magical—whether in her relationship to music, dancing, or brief flashes of her background—activating a liminal area where past and present, reality and fantasy, coexist. This reminds us of Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," a site of cultural hybridity in which identities are always negotiated and changed (Bhabha 37).

Critics have pointed out how magical realism lets writers question accepted narratives and undermine set binaries of identity (López 58). In Smith's urban fiction, this approach is well suited to convey the social paradoxes of modern cities and the fluidity and complexity of diasporic identities. Furthermore, Smith's incorporation of fantastical elements acts as a subtle critique of systemic inequalities related to race, class, and gender, inviting readers to question the boundaries between reality and fantasy, power and resistance. This article explores the nuanced use of magical realism and fantastical motifs in *NW* and *Swing Time*, arguing that these elements enrich Smith's urban narratives by enabling deeper engagement with themes of identity, multiculturalism, and social critique. By

means of thorough textual analysis and theoretical participation, it shows how Smith innovates within the genre of urban fiction to mirror the lived reality of multicultural existence in twenty-first century.

Challenging conventional limits between reality and imagination, magical realism is a literary genre that especially combines the daily with the spectacular. Originating in Latin American literature, it was popularised by writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Alejo Carpentier, who introduced the idea of "lo real maravilloso," or the "marvellous real," a reality infused with magical qualities accepted as normal by characters inside the story (Carpentier 25). Unlike pure fantasy or surrealism, magical realism is based on a known world but punctuated by remarkable events or details that challenge conventional realism. Alejo Carpentier called magical realism "the expression of a Latin American reality, which includes the marvellous" (Carpentier 27). This method offers a layered, multifarious view of reality by letting authors include historical trauma, folklore, and cultural mythology into modern stories. Crucially, by combining several points of view, frequently representing the complexity of postcolonial and diasporic identities, magical realism challenges set, single interpretations of truth.

Particularly in relation to global cities distinguished by migration and cosmopolitanism, magical realism is crucial in urban fiction. It captures the scattered, mixed sensations of city people juggling several cultural realities concurrently. Stuart Hall's idea of cultural identity as "a 'production' which is never complete, always in process" (Hall 44) fits the fluid, dynamic world magical realism shows. With its varied population and interwoven histories, the city offers a perfect venue for magical realism to highlight the conflicts between the physical and intangible, the apparent and invisible.

Writers such as Zadie Smith use these components to expose the invisible currents of metropolitan life. Urban magical realism challenges readers to see past appearances and emphasises how cultural memory, social inequality, and identity challenges shape daily events. Understanding magical realism's roots and purposes helps one to appreciate its application in Smith's books, where it becomes a tool not only for storytelling but also for social critique and cultural exploration. By combining the magical with the mundane, urban fiction expands its capacity to reflect the complexity of modern life.

The books *NW* and *Swing Time* by Zadie Smith deftly incorporate magical realism or mystical elements into the fabric of their metropolitan locations, therefore enhancing the representation of the life of people in multicultural London. Though Smith's stories mostly centre on social realism, these subtle surreal moments serve as a means of expression for the inner conflicts and complexity of identity that might otherwise remain invisible. In *NW*, Smith offers the fractured experiences of four heroes negotiating the sometimes harsh reality of northwest London. Though the experimental framework of the book reflects the shattered identities it investigates, Smith uses some bizarre passages to heighten the psychological depth of her characters. When Leah discovers she is overwhelmed in a difficult conversation, for instance, the story notes that "everything felt unreal, like the city had shifted beneath her feet" (Smith, *NW* 173). Leah's distance from her surroundings and herself reflects this moment of separation, not just artistic flair. The dream helps readers to grasp the emotional dislocation experienced by people trapped between personal aspirations and social expectations.

Swing Time similarly employs fanciful details to highlight the narrator's nuanced relationship to her background and identity. The book explores issues of race, migration, and belonging even as it centres on two girls who aspire to be dancers. "When we danced, it was as if time folded over itself," the narrator notes in one scene as transcendent energies blur the lines between past and present, real and imagined: "When we danced," (Smith, *Swing Time* 89). Homi Bhabha's theory of the "third space," which details a liminal zone where hybrid identities arise and cultural meanings are negotiated, helps one to understand the metaphorical folding of time hints at a magical realist sensibility, where memory, history, and identity intermingle fluidly. Often caught between several worlds—racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic—Smith's characters live in this "third space." Critics like Wendy Faris have contended that magical realism serves to "problematise boundaries" between reality and fantasy, allowing marginalised voices to express complicated social realities in creative ways, so externalising these internal tensions and liminal states (Faris 11). In conclusion, the fanciful components in Smith's urban novels are far from decorative; rather, Smith's employment of surreal events in *NW* and *Swing Time* precisely challenges the

prevalent, often oversimplified, narratives about race, class, and urban life. Reflecting the paradoxes and multiplicity of life in modern multicultural cities, they are essential windows into the psychological and cultural reality of her characters.

The way Zadie Smith explores the fluid and sometimes fractured character of identity in multicultural metropolitan environments using magical realism in *NW* and *Swing Time* is quite convincing. In *Swing Time*, the narrator's path is marked by an ongoing search for belonging in a world divided by race, class, and history. Smith captures how cultural hybridity and the negotiating of selfhood are lived experiences shaped by both internal and external forces through moments that blur the lines between reality and fantasy. Her recollections and sensory experiences reveal magical realism, which helps her to cross geographic boundaries and chronological time. For example, the narrator notes while considering her family's background, "History wasn't a straight line." A loop, a spiral, wrapping back on itself, it carried the past into the present (Smith, *Swing Time* 142). This non-linear view of time fits the ability of magical realism to challenge accepted chronology and underline the continuation of cultural memory.

This narrative approach fits Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, which holds that identities are not set but rather continually "in process" inside what he refers to as the "third space," a place where many cultures interact and fresh meanings develop (Bhabha 38). Smith reflects the liminal spaces her characters live in, spaces that challenge simple classification and highlight the complexity of multicultural identities by including fanciful elements in her stories. Similarly, *NW* shows characters negotiating several identities in a socio-economic environment that usually marginalises them. Leah's effort to balance the several cultural expectations placed upon her is symbolised in her times of dreamlike detachment. The magical realism events start to represent the inner tensions people who live "between worlds," a notion important to postcolonial identity theory, experience (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 102).

Moreover, by exposing the hidden layers of experience under daily life, magical realism lets Smith question the accepted social myths about race and belonging. Like Wendy Faris contends, magical realism "makes visible what

dominant narratives seek to erase or marginalise" (Faris 15). Magical realism in *NW* and *Swing Time* is not only a stylistic decision but also a deliberate narrative strategy that enhances the exploration of identity and multiculturalism in Smith's work since the fanciful elements uncover hidden histories and voices, so giving form to the invisible social reality of her characters. It emphasises how moulded by histories, experiences, and social factors transcending simple realism, cultural identity is fluid, complicated, and sometimes contradictory.

Using magical realism in *NW* and *Swing Time*, Zadie Smith offers a potent weapon for challenging social systems around gender, class, and colour. Smith invites readers to interact with these concerns in novel, provocative ways by adding bits of the magical into her stories, so highlighting the sometimes invisible but profoundly felt consequences of systematic injustices.

Smith reveals the psychological and emotional effects of urban poverty and racial marginalisation in *NW* by means of moments of magical realism, while she also exposes the hard reality of these circumstances. When Leah gets trapped in existential crises, for instance, the story shows her psychological fragmentation: "It was as if the walls of her world melted, and she was both inside and outside herself, looking at her life as if it belonged to someone else," (Smith, *NW* 210). This dreamlike alienation represents how systemic powers reject people from their own identities and communities. Such narrative devices reflect Frantz Fanon's claim that racial and colonial injustice generate "a sense of self that is divided, split between conflicting realities" (Fanon 17).

Likewise, by showing the two girls' different life choices, *Swing Time* questions racial prejudices and gender roles. Here, the magical realism is modest but important: dance and music expose the restrictions put on Black female bodies but yet they are portrayed almost as magical languages that transcend social boundaries. Our bodies moved with a type of freedom that the world outside refused to offer us, a freedom that felt almost surreal, the narrator notes (Smith, *Swing Time* 67). This combination of strength and constraint highlights the intersectional character of oppression, a theory developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw that contends that race, gender, and class are linked systems of power (Crenshaw 140).

Smith's deliberate use of magical realism also enables her to subvert prevailing wisdom regarding social mobility and identity. The mystical events in NW challenge the linear concept of development and show how rigidly psychologically repressive class divisions are. The story shows Felix's experience as "time folding in on itself, past and future colliding, and the dream of escape slipping through his fingers like smoke," when he muses over his hopes and mistakes (Smith, NW 178). This picture helps to show the fleeting character of upward mobility for underprivileged people.

Here especially relevant is Wendy Faris's view of magical realism "foregrounds social contradictions and exposes political reality" (Faris 22). Smith's combination of mystical aspects with urban realism challenges readers to see past appearances and acknowledge the complicated, often conflicting reality faced by those living at the nexus of race, class, and gender. Finally, magical realism in Smith's NW and *Swing Time* functions as a social critique as well as a literary tool. Offering a moving commentary on modern urban living, it helps the reader to better grasp systematic disparities and the subtle ways they affect identity.

In addition to enhancing the narrative texture, Zadie Smith's deft application of magical realism in NW and *Swing Time* profoundly influences readers' impressions and sympathies with the characters' experienced reality. Smith invites readers to emotionally and intellectually interact with the difficult social issues her characters encounter by combining the daily with surreal events, so developing a more sophisticated awareness of identity, trauma, and resilience.

Magical realist events in NW let readers enter the fractured psyches of people like Leah and Felix. Scenes where "the world around her seemed to waver and distort, like a reflection in rippling water" (Smith, NW 122) help Leah to communicate her sense of separation. Readers can feel the loneliness and instability that define her life by means of this picture. Such narrative techniques reflect Rita Felski's idea of "recognition" in literary reading, in which affective participation helps readers to emotionally connect with the experiences of characters (Felski 75). Here, the magical realism serves as a link to make the psychological concrete.

In *Swing Time*, too, moments when the narrator considers dancing and music as "almost otherworldly forces" (Smith, *Swing Time* 89) help readers to enter the cultural and emotional worlds outside simple description. By showing how art serves as a form of resistance and self-expression among structural limitations, this sensorial and almost magical portrayal opens out space for empathy. Furthermore, magical realism forces the reader to rethink time and space, therefore promoting a complex knowledge of history and identity. Magical realism "disorders linear narratives of progress and loss, allowing marginalised histories to surface and be felt," scholar Louise Westling contends (Westling 102). Smith's use of time folding or moments when past and present collide helps readers to understand how history and memory impact the identities and challenges of her characters in ways that simple realism might not powerfully communicate.

Smith encourages empathy that goes beyond simple pity by letting readers into these liminal, perhaps dreamlike environments, therefore acknowledging the complexity and inconsistencies in human experience. Storytelling is "an act of making strange the familiar," Smith herself has observed, pushing viewers to perceive the world from fresh angles (Smith, Interview 2013). Finally, reader involvement is much shaped by magical realism in *NW* and *Swing Time*. It invites readers to live in the deeply detailed inner life of individuals negotiating identification in modern metropolitan environments, therefore enhancing empathy by making the unseen visible, the unthinkable speakable, and so more relevant.

More than merely a narrative flourish, Zadie Smith's use of magical realism and fanciful aspects in *NW* and *Swing Time* provides a necessary prism through which the complexity of identity, culture, and social disparities in modern urban life is examined. Magical realism lets Smith highlight the inner conflicts of people negotiating race, class, and gender in sociopolitical settings that are often hostile or indifferent, so reflecting the fluid, often fractured nature of multicultural identities by challenging conventional realist storytelling. Leah's episodes of surreal detachment in *NW* or the narrator's almost transcendent experiences with dance in *Swing Time* allow readers to reach emotional and psychological levels that could otherwise remain hidden with these fanciful elements. By doing this, Smith conforms to Homi Bhabha's idea of the "third space," in which cultural

hybridity and identity building take place in transitional, transforming spheres (Bhabha 38).

Furthermore, Smith's use of magical realism exposes social conflicts and invites readers to reevaluate ideas about progress, belonging, and selfhood, therefore subverting accepted narratives. Finally, by means of these surreal elements, Smith invites readers to interact more deeply with the lived realities of her characters—going beyond surface-level sympathy to real recognition and understanding. Wendy Faris emphasises how magical realism "makes visible what dominant narratives seek to erase or marginalise." Rita Felski notes that the power of literature is in "making strange the familiar," and Smith's magical realism reveals the invisible textures of modern urban life, so augmenting the social critique of the books and their emotional resonance (Felski 78). In essence, the magical realism in *NW* and *Swing Time* is a sophisticated narrative strategy that enriches the novels' social critique and increases their emotional resonance. Zadie Smith's work is essential for modern debates on multiculturalism and urban experience since it asks us to rethink identity, history, and community in a society defined by cultural pluralism and ongoing inequality.

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Namana Ashok

Namana Ashok is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in the Department of English at Andhra University under the supervision of Dr. Katikathala Rajamanikyam. His research interests lie primarily in postcolonial studies and fiction related to multiculturalism. Committed to academic growth and continuous learning, he actively seeks opportunities to deepen his understanding of subjects relevant to

his research. He has also attended a Translation Training Program organized by the National Translation Mission, a part of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore.

Katikathala Rajamanikyam

Dr. Katikathala Rajamanikyam completed her Ph.D. from Acharya Nagarjuna University and has over 25 years of academic experience. She has served in various capacities, including lecturer, principal, and assistant professor. Her research primarily focuses on Dalit women, and her contributions in this field have earned her numerous state and national-level awards. Under her guidance, one scholar has been awarded a Ph.D., reflecting her commitment to mentoring and academic excellence.