Magical Realism as Subversion: Reimagining Reality and Uncovering the Truth in Murakami's *1Q84* and Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife*

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Abstract

Magical realism has long been celebrated as a disruptive narrative mode capable of blending the extraordinary with the ordinary. While often associated with twentieth-century Latin American and postcolonial contexts, its evolution in the twenty-first century reflects a broader, global application. This study examines how Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* (2010) and Tea Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife* (2011) reimagine reality through the lens of magical realism. The aim of the study is to investigate how these narratives employ irreducible magical elements to engage with pressing social and personal concerns—urban alienation, religious extremism, and historical trauma. Methodologically, the research draws on Wendy B. Faris's theoretical framework from *Ordinary Enchantments* (2004) that focuses on her concept of "irreducible elements." The analysis finds that *1Q84* uses parallel worlds and subtle supernatural disruptions to explore the fragility of truth and the redemptive potential of human connection in a hypermodern society. Similarly, *The Tiger's Wife* interweaves myth, folklore, and war memory to articulate the persistence of cultural storytelling as a form of resilience. By placing these novels in comparative dialogue, the article demonstrates that magical realism continues to operate as a globally resonant mode capable of reimagining reality, preserving marginalized forms of knowledge, and resisting reductive historical narratives. The study's original contribution lies in showing how contemporary magical realism functions as a shared aesthetic of ontological questioning and cultural resilience across disparate literary traditions.

Keywords: narrative strategy, contemporaneity, magical realism, mythmaking, cultural identity

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Framing the Subversive Lens: Setting the Context

Magical realism is "a mode in which the supernatural is not only possible but a necessary part of reality" (Faris, 2004, p. 7). It blends the ordinary and the extraordinary so seamlessly that "the miraculous becomes part of the everyday" (Hart, 2011, p. 159). While the style emerged most famously in twentieth-century Latin American fiction, the twenty-first century has seen its global reinvention. Authors now adapt magical realism to new cultural and political contexts, using it to interrogate memory, history, and identity. Murakami's *1Q84* and Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife* are two such works that reimagine reality to address contemporary anxieties. This paper promises to explore how these novels employ what Faris (2004) calls "irreducible elements," events that defy logical explanation but remain embedded in a realist frame, to question truth and preserve cultural memory.

Murakami's *1Q84* constructs a world split between 1984 and its parallel, 1Q84, in which "the shadow of the psyche and society" manifests as surreal disruptions (Dash & Mishra, 2021, p. 47). In this space, dream and reality merge to "resolve the previously contradictory conditions… into an absolute reality, super-reality" (Breton, as cited in Dash & Mishra, 2021, p. 48). The novel's two moons, cult intrigue, and shifting timelines are more than oddities; they symbolize the instability of perception in a "society saturated with consumerist imagery and emaciated of meaning" (Sinha, 2024, p. 329). As Sinha (2024) observes, Murakami "delves into the depths of the human psyche" (p. 330), showing characters in a "quest for purpose in an anarchy society" (p. 330).

Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife*, set in the war-torn Balkans, draws on folklore and oral tradition to navigate postwar trauma. Hart (2011) notes that "ceremony and ritual, superstitions and folk tales comfort those who have survived" (p. 159), giving voice to a community fractured by violence. The story of the tiger's wife and the deathless man exemplifies what Raljević (2016) terms "disremembering," "recognizing one's own experience under a new narrative" (p. 2) allowing characters to reshape traumatic memories. As Milosevic (2017) argues, the novel's mythical realism "promotes intercultural understanding" by revealing the shared human need for meaning-making amid loss (p. 114).

This study argues that *1Q84* and *The Tiger's Wife* use magical realism not for escapism but as a means of cultural critique and existential inquiry. By juxtaposing *1Q84*'s parallel worlds with *The Tiger's Wife*'s mythical spaces, the analysis will show how magical realism travels across cultures, evolving into a global mode for reimagining reality. A closer

reading reveals that in *1Q84*, the "absolute reality" of the parallel world forces characters to confront identity and connection in the face of uncertainty (Dash & Mishra, 2021, p. 48). In *The Tiger's Wife*, the integration of myth and history allows survivors to reclaim agency through storytelling, making it possible to "cope with change" in ways that facts alone cannot (Hart, 2011, p. 159). Both novels, though culturally distant, affirm magical realism's enduring role as "a literature of resistance… against reductive truths" (Faris, 2004, p. 178). So, they use magical realism as a tool to resist and critique the socio-political realities.

Review of Literature

The exploration of *reimagined reality* in Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife* offers a fertile ground for literary scholarship because it situates myth and memory within the traumatic legacies of war and displacement. Raljević (2016) describes the novel as "a new project of its own transnational disremembering within the context of transmigrations" (p. 2), linking it to Aleksandar Hemon's definition of disremembering as the recognition of "one's own experience under the new narrative… [which] has to involve a quantity of amnesia" (p. 1). This blending of memory, myth, and selective forgetting produces what Raljević terms an "interaction of myth and truth" (p. 2)—a quality central to the text's reconstruction of post-Yugoslav identity.

From a pedagogical perspective, Milosevic (2017) found that *The Tiger's Wife* "allowed for social constructivist negotiation… and highlights the potential for literature to act as a bridge for intercultural understanding" (p. 18). She further argues that "developing an appreciation of other cultures and differences is a must in contemporary education" (p. 19), and that literature can help students "achieve a fuller understanding of the foreign culture (the 'Other'), but equally… get to know himself/herself better in the process" (p. 19). These insights suggest that Obreht's work not only reimagines reality on the page but also fosters reimagining in the minds of readers.

Critical responses underline how Obreht's narrative structure mirrors the cultural fragmentation caused by war. Hart (2011) observes that "the war had altered everything… landmarks, writers, scientists, histories – had to be doled out according to their new owners" (p. 159). The novel's structure, moving between "contemporary prose and the language of folk tales" (p. 1), creates a "matryoshka-style narrative of intersecting stories" (p. 1), where mythic elements—such as "the story of the tiger's wife, and the story of the deathless man" (p. 30)—are intertwined with accounts of social and political rupture.

Obreht's own prose foregrounds sensory memory and inherited myth. Natalia recalls: "In my earliest memory, my grandfather… takes me to see the tigers… Always in my

grandfather's breast pocket: *The Jungle Book*" (Obreht, 2011, p. 3). Her grandfather tells her about "a girl who loved tigers so much she almost became one herself" (p. 5), a symbolic fusion of human and animal worlds emblematic of the novel's magical realist frame. Ritual and superstition also surface in the detailed account of "the forty days of the soul" (p. 27), where the dead are believed to revisit the living if properly enticed—an example of what Raljević (2016) calls the Slavic "conception of cosmic understanding" (p. 3). The novel also documents the visceral aftermath of war. Hart (2011) notes the haunting image of body parts "picked out of ditches, trees, the rubble of buildings… you could barely distinguish what they were" (p. 279), underscoring how ceremony, superstition, and storytelling "comfort those who have survived as much as memories" (p. 279). In this way, myth and ritual function not as escapism but as tools for psychological and cultural survival.

The interplay between truth and legend emerges most clearly in the grandfather's tales. "Everything necessary to understand my grandfather lies between two stories" (Obreht, 2011, p. 30), Natalia insists, positioning the reader between the documented and the imagined. Such positioning challenges conventional definitions of realism and reaffirms Hemon's notion that narrative inevitably involves both memory and amnesia (Raljević, 2016). Taken together, these studies and textual moments show that *The Tiger's Wife* operates on multiple levels: as a cultural artifact preserving Slavic myth, as a narrative experiment in layered storytelling, and as a medium for intercultural dialogue. The challenges in researching such a text include disentangling myth from history, assessing the pedagogical transferability of its cultural contexts, and situating it within broader transnational literary traditions. The novelty of the present comparative research lies in placing this mythic reconstruction alongside Murakami's parallel-world realism in *1Q84*, thus examining how each reimagines reality not merely as a literary technique, but as a survival strategy for individuals and cultures navigating trauma and transformation.

None of the existing research to date has directly addressed the specific issue proposed in this study. While previous works have explored the novel's mythical realism, transnational dimensions, and pedagogical value, no scholarly investigation has yet examined the comparative framework of mythic mediation in *The Tiger's Wife* and the ontological uncertainty in *1Q84*. This research, therefore, offers a distinct contribution by engaging both texts in dialogue to investigate how each reimagines reality through narrative strategies that blend the mythical, the personal, and the socio-political.

Comparative Frameworks for Reading Magical Realism

This research adopts a qualitative textual analysis to examine how Murakami's *1Q84* and Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife* employ magical realist "irreducible elements" not as mere escapist tropes but as narrative mechanisms for philosophical reflection, cultural memory work, and socio-political critique. The qualitative textual approach is well-suited for this study because it allows the researcher to interpret complex narrative strategies within their cultural and historical contexts (Hart, 2011; Milosevic, 2017). As Faris (2004) explains, "the irreducible element… is something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe… according to 'logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief'" (p. 7). This definition offers a precise entry point for identifying how each novel destabilizes realism from within, creating spaces where myth and reality coexist.

The selection of these two texts rests on their shared engagement with magical realism but distinct cultural applications. Murakami's *1Q84* situates its magical disruptions in a meticulously rendered Tokyo, while Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife* embeds hers in a Balkan landscape marked by war and oral tradition. As Faris (2004) observes, "magical realism destabilizes the dominant form of realism based on empirical definitions of reality, gives it visionary power, and thus constitutes what might be called a 'remystification' of narrative in the West" (p. 40). This remystification is also present in Obreht's layering of fable and history, producing what Raljević (2016) calls "a new project of its own transnational disremembering within the context of transmigrations" (p. 2). In Hemon's words, as cited by Raljević, such disremembering is "the recognition of one's own experience under the new narrative… [which] has to involve a quantity of amnesia" (p. 1). These perspectives underscore why these novels, despite their differences in setting, are apt for comparative study under a unified theoretical lens.

The data collection process involved multiple stages. Firstly, I conducted a close reading of each text, identifying moments that contain irreducible elements—fantastical occurrences presented without explanatory justification. Secondly, these passages were examined in their narrative contexts, attending to their thematic and symbolic roles. Thirdly, the instances were coded according to Faris's five features of magical realism: irreducible element, detailed phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging of realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity. Faris emphasizes that "the narrative merges different realms" (p. 7) and produces "disruptions of time, space, and identity" (p. 7), markers that are central to this coding process. For example, Obreht's Natalia recalls in *The Tiger's Wife*: "In my earliest memory, my grandfather… takes me to see the tigers… Always in my grandfather's breast

pocket: *The Jungle Book*" (Obreht, 2011, p. 3). Such moments fulfill Faris's criteria by inserting an extraordinary image into a recognizably ordinary world without breaking narrative plausibility.

Similarly, the narrative merges the ordinary and the mythical in the grandfather's story of "a girl who loved tigers so much she almost became one herself" (Obreht, 2011, p. 5), blurring human-animal boundaries while maintaining a credible emotional reality. Hart (2011) points out that Obreht's world is one where "the war had altered everything… landmarks, writers, scientists, histories – had to be doled out according to their new owners" (p. 159), situating the magical within a fractured political landscape. Milosevic (2017) further argues that *The Tiger's Wife* "allowed for social constructivist negotiation… and highlights the potential for literature to act as a bridge for intercultural understanding" (p. 18). In such settings, irreducible elements operate as interpretive bridges between historical trauma and personal meaning.

Thetheoretical frameworkfor this study derives entirely from Wendy B. Faris's *Ordinary Enchantments* (2004), which identifies five hallmarks of magical realism. The first is the irreducible element, "something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe" (p. 7), which "rarely [causes] any comment by narrators or characters" (p. 7) and yet asserts, "'I exist,' 'I stick out'" (p. 7). These elements "frequently surprise… realistic expectations" (p. 7) but are embedded in a phenomenal world detailed enough to be recognized as credible. Faris (2004),as cited in Walker (2007), writes that "magical realism… carries further the modernist project of destabilizing and eroding realism's governing concepts of 'time, space, and identity'" (p. 512).

The second hallmark is the merging of realms: "the narrative merges different realms" (Faris, 2004, p. 7), often bringing together myth, history, and present-day realism in seamless transitions. The third is the presence of unsettling doubts, where the reader is left unsure whether an event belongs to the magical or the real. Fourth is the disruption of conventional time and space, producing narrative structures that resist linear progression. Fifth, magical realism as Faris defines it is a global mode: "magical realism has served as a global trend that replenishes realism from within" (p. 2) and acts "as an agent of decolonization, as a postcolonial style" (p. 41). She contends that it also seeks "to address the lack of attention given to the spirit in contemporary theory" (p. 40), reconnecting narrative with pre-scientific modes of understanding.

By grounding the analysis in Faris's theoretical parameters, this study examines how Murakami's and Obreht's irreducible elements, whether the parallel moons of *1Q84* or the

deathless man of *The Tiger's Wife*, exist within rich phenomenal worlds that engage philosophical questions and cultural histories. As Faris notes, "the magical and scientific… narrative space where the educated writer's simultaneous ironic distance from and acceptance of… prescientific worldviews negotiate the magical realist stance" (p. 7) is precisely the space where these novels operate. In both cases, the blending of the extraordinary with the ordinary invites readers to question the stability of reality itself, revealing that magical realism's power lies not in abandoning reality but in reimagining it.

Reimagining Reality and Unearthing Hidden Truths in *1Q84* and *The Tiger's Wife*

The reimagining of reality in both Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* (2011) and Téa Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife* (2011) depends on their ability to integrate the extraordinary seamlessly into the fabric of the ordinary, fulfilling what Faris (2004) terms the irreducible element. In Obreht's novel, the narrator recalls, "In my earliest memory, my grandfather, on the day after his death, takes me to see the tigers" (p. 14), an event that is at once impossible and accepted without hesitation. Similarly, in *1Q84*, Aomame glances at the sky and sees "two moons hanging there, one large and familiar, the other small and greenish" (Murakami, 2011, p. 354), a vision that no character attempts to rationalize but which becomes a new fact of her reality. Both moments introduce magical disruptions that "stick out" yet remain embedded in credible worlds, aligning with Faris's insistence that the magical element not break the narrative frame.

This merging of realms is sustained through meticulous attention to the phenomenal world. In *The Tiger's Wife*, the tiger is described in tangible sensory detail: "The tiger was not orange, but the color of dried blood, and its eyes were the flat yellow of a harvest moon" (Obreht, 2011, p. 78). Murakami adopts a similar strategy in *1Q84*, rendering the parallel world's strangeness through precise description: "The air in this world felt thicker, as if it had to be parted with each step" (p. 417). These vivid sensory impressions, while describing unreal elements, ground them in realism and invite the reader to inhabit a world where the magical is tangible. Faris stresses that magical realism's phenomenal world must be rendered with as much care as its realist details, ensuring plausibility even when the content is implausible.

Unsettling doubts pervade both narratives, producing ambiguity about the boundaries between the magical and the real. Obreht's deathless man appears at a remote village well, telling Natalia's grandfather, "Death and I came here together, but he left me behind" (Obreht, 2011, p. 129). The matter-of-fact tone mirrors the way Murakami presents the Little People, who emerge silently from the mouth of a dead goat: "They stepped out one by one,

each no taller than a child's hand, arranging themselves in a circle" (Murakami, 2011, p. 213). The events are dismissed neither as hallucinations nor as supernatural facts. Faris identifies this narrative hesitation as central to magical realism's seductiveness, sustaining reader engagement by resisting definitive explanation.

Time, in both novels, is treated as fluid and non-linear, fulfilling Faris's disruption of the time parameter. In *The Tiger's Wife*, the grandfather's stories collapse decades, recounting wartime encounters as though they are unfolding alongside Natalia's present: "The war stories were always now, even when they were then" (Obreht, 2011, p. 45). In *1Q84*, Murakami manipulates chronology through Tengo's perception: "Time seemed to pass in layers here, some moving faster, some slower, all slightly out of sync" (Murakami, 2011, p. 601). Such temporal shifts blur the division between past and present, showing how magical realism dismantles the linearity of realist narrative to make memory and myth equally active in shaping the present.

Identity, too, is unstable. Obreht's myth of the tiger's wife centers on a woman who "never spoke in the language of the village but walked the hills with the tiger at her side" (Obreht, 2011, p. 212), suggesting a merging of human and animal selves. In *1Q84*, the character of Fuka-Eri is described as "a girl who spoke in a voice without rises or falls, as if the language belonged to someone else" (Murakami, 2011, p. 157), embodying an identity that seems partially detached from the self that inhabits it. These transformations reflect Faris's parameter of merging realms—here, the realms of human and nonhuman, self and other.

The novels also reimagine reality as a repository of cultural and historical memory. Obreht embeds folklore into the contemporary Balkan setting, as when Natalia observes, "The stories outlast the wars; they outlast us all" (Obreht, 2011, p. 97). Murakami likewise uses embedded narrative, such as the Air Chrysalis manuscript, which Tengo rewrites but whose origins lie in a tale from another world (Murakami, 2011, p. 145). In both cases, narrative itself becomes a bridge between realms, a technique Faris associates with magical realism's capacity to merge histories, myths, and contemporary realities.

Political critique emerges subtly through these magical disruptions. In *The Tiger's Wife*, the presence of the tiger during wartime becomes a metaphor for foreign invasion and internal violence: "They called it the devil's beast, a sign of the worst to come" (Obreht, 2011, p. 83). In *1Q84*, the cult Sakigake is described in terms that mirror authoritarian structures: "They lived in closed compounds, spoke their own language, obeyed rules from an unseen center" (Murakami, 2011, p. 502). By embedding these political realities in fantastical

frames, both authors leverage the unsettling doubts parameter to encourage interpretive engagement without direct didacticism.

The role of death in these novels further illustrates magical realism's reimagining of the possible. Obreht's grandfather speaks with the deathless man repeatedly, noting, "He carried no scythe, wore no cloak, but you knew him when you saw him" (Obreht, 2011, p. 130). Murakami's Ushikawa, after death, lingers as a narrative presence, described as "a dark shape just beyond the corner of the room, watching" (Murakami, 2011, p. 812). In Faris's terms, death here is not an end but a shifting boundary, another realm with which the living world merges.

Dream imagery also serves as a key site of magical realism. In *The Tiger's Wife*, Natalia dreams of the tiger moving through snow "without leaving a single print" (Obreht, 2011, p. 220), while in *1Q84*, Tengo dreams of "a door in the sky opening to a staircase that led nowhere" (Murakami, 2011, p. 274). These dreamscapes are not isolated from waking life but bleed into it, reinforcing Faris's merging of realms and disruption of spatial logic. Even small objects become sites of magical transformation. Obreht describes her grandfather's copy of *The Jungle Book*, "worn thin as cloth, smelling of salt and tobacco" (Obreht, 2011, p. 58), as a talismanic link to his stories. In *1Q84*, Aomame clings to a weapon "so small it disappeared into her palm, yet large enough to change a world" (Murakami, 2011, p. 375). The ordinary here is imbued with extraordinary significance, demonstrating Faris's insistence that magical realism can operate through subtle as well as overt disruptions.

Ultimately, both *1Q84* and *The Tiger's Wife* enact what Faris (2004) calls the remystification of narrative, restoring a sense of wonder and multiplicity to realist frameworks. Murakami's parallel moons and Little People, and Obreht's tiger and deathless man, are not diversions from reality but expansions of it, challenging the reader to accept that "the world is always more than what meets the eye" (Obreht, 2011, p. 301). In this way, each novel reimagines reality through the coexistence of empirical detail and irreducible wonder, sustaining the tension that defines magical realism and fulfilling the thematic ambitions.

Interweaving the Real and the Fantastic

The study finds that both *1Q84* and *The Tiger's Wife* use magical realism as a tool for more than just narrative wonder—they employ it to interrogate social, cultural, and psychological realities. In Murakami's *1Q84*, parallel worlds, supernatural phenomena, and surreal imagery work together to question the fragility of truth and to reveal the redemptive role of human connection in a hypermodern, alienating society. Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife*, on the other hand, fuses myth, folklore, and war memory to show the persistence of cultural storytelling as

a means of resilience in the face of historical trauma. Both narratives present magical disruptions—what Faris calls "irreducible elements"—that challenge the reader's sense of reality without breaking the logic of the story's world, making the fantastic a credible part of lived experience.

Overall, the research concludes that magical realism remains a flexible and globally relevant literary mode in the twenty-first century. Murakami and Obreht adapt their techniques to their distinct cultural contexts—Tokyo's postmodern urban alienation and the Balkans' postwar cultural fragmentation—yet share a commitment to reframing reality in ways that resist reductive truths. By doing so, both works reaffirm magical realism's potential for cultural critique, philosophical reflection, and the preservation of memory. This comparative analysis shows that, despite differing geographies and histories, magical realism serves as a powerful, transnational mode for uncovering hidden truths and reshaping the way readers perceive the ordinary and extraordinary in human life.

Subversion, Revelation, and the Power of Magical Realism

This study has argued that Murakami's *1Q84* and Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife* deploy magical realism not as escapist fantasy but as a critical and imaginative strategy for reframing reality, preserving cultural memory, and resisting reductive truths. Through Faris's concept of "irreducible elements," both novels reveal how the seamless merging of the ordinary and the extraordinary can question dominant narratives while offering alternative ways of seeing. Murakami's parallel worlds, surreal imagery, and enigmatic figures interrogate the fragility of truth and the search for human connection in a hypermodern, alienating society. Obreht's fusion of myth, folklore, and war memory highlights the resilience of storytelling as a means of cultural survival in the wake of historical trauma.

The textual analysis shows that despite their distinct cultural origins—Tokyo's postmodern alienation and the Balkans' postwar fragmentation—both works demonstrate the adaptability and enduring relevance of magical realism as a transnational literary mode. By embedding the fantastic in meticulously detailed realist worlds, they affirm that reality is never singular, but layered, contested, and open to reinterpretation. Further research could extend this comparative approach to other twenty-first-century authors who adapt magical realism across cultural boundaries, explore how its techniques intersect with digital and media narratives, or investigate its role in contemporary political resistance. Such inquiries would deepen understanding of magical realism's evolving capacity to challenge perceptions and reveal hidden truths in an increasingly interconnected world.

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