

Mystery and magic realism in *The Distance Between Us* and *the Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*: A comparative literary analysis

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Abstract

*This study scrutinizes the magical realism in Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* and Clarissa Goenawan's *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida* through the four characteristics of Wendy B. Faris: the irreducible element, the phenomenal world, the unsettling doubt, and the merged nature. This study was under a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the presence and function of magical realism and mystery. The qualitative approach was designated to allow a deeper understanding of how narrative elements contribute to emotional resonance and ambiguity in literary texts. The primary data sources were the two novels under study. Selected narrative passages and dialogues that exhibit characteristics of magical realism and mystery were identified for analysis. The study used content analysis with a thematic analytical framework supported by a comparative literary analysis. Data were scrutinized using Wendy B. Faris's four characteristics of magical realism. Findings show that in Goenawan's novel, ghost sightings and surreal events build a mysterious atmosphere which challenges the boundaries of reality. While in Grande's work, *El Otro Lado* is present as an invisible force that is full of mystery, creating doubt and emotional tension. Both works display how magical realism and mystery work together to discover complex inner experiences and jiggle the boundaries between reality and unconscious. Future scholars are encouraged to figure on these findings by discovering how magical realism encounters with trauma theory, identity formation, or diasporic narratives across diverse cultural contexts.*

Keywords: *irreducible elements; magic realism; mystery; phenomenal world*

INTRODUCTION

Magical realism historically emerged in African literature, but it is always associated with Latin America literature (Abella, 2016; Fangyuan, 2023; Mejia, 2021). However, magic realism challenges cultural stereotypes while addressing historical issues (Carlsen, 2018). Magic realism was firstly considered as in contrast to the "marvelous real" with European surrealism, shaping a unique aesthetic derived from Latin American culture and society (Figlerowicz & Mertehikian, 2023). This concept of magic realism was forgotten in Europe but

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re-emerged in Latin American literature starting in 1940 with various meanings. Magic realism uses a realist approach to everyday events with a combination of magical elements (Sugiarti et al., 2022; Zamora & Faris, 1995). Chernyshova (2022) claims this reason as magic realism '*emphasizing the unique expression of magical elements derived from local myths, religions, and cultures in the narrative.*' However, an article discussing the issue of it juxtaposes them with everyday things in the real world. The key to understanding magic realism is understanding how stories are constructed to provide a realistic context for fictional magical events (Bowers, 2004; Herrera, 2024).

Magic realism was coined from the word 'magic' which refers to the belief or practice of influencing events or changing material conditions through supernatural means (Bailey, 2015; Bortolussi, 2003; Faris, 2004). It involves the human ability to govern nature such as events, objects, people, and bodily phenomena through mystical or paranormal methods. For something to be considered magical, it typically must be widely accepted within a society. Traditionally, magical practices aim for immediate, visible effects (Bailey, 2015). The term *magic realism* was coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a post-expressionist painting style that blends realistic and magical elements, revealing hidden mysteries in everyday life (Bowers, 2004; Rajabi et al., 2020). Roh's use of *magic* rather than *mytstical* emphasized the normalization of the supernatural through detailed, realistic portrayal, a core aspect of magic realism.

Magical realism is a narrative story that combines elements of realism, fantastic, and things that are logically incomprehensible (Faris, 1995; Ouyang, 2005). In this genre, stories are told with an attitude of compliant the existence of magical or supernatural elements without enquiring their eccentricity (Fangyuan, 2023; Nightingale, 2024). Magical realism often associations with mystery themes because it explores the dark and concealed side of the human experience. In general, there are two main ideas of magic realism as a form of narrative. One highlights structural aspects in the text, and the other re-counts the work to external conditions such as political, social, and cultural issues (Nightingale, 2024). Unlike the fantastical genre that separates the natural from the extraordinary and stresses rational explanations, magical realism instead participates supernatural elements into everyday life, thus creating a reliable tension between reality and magic. There are five elements of magic realism: irreducible elements, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity (Faris, 2004; Fathonah, 2020; Sugiarti et al., 2022).

Mystery in magical realism, blurs boundaries by offering events or experiences that resist direct explanation. While magical realism seamlessly participates the supernatural into ordinary life, mystery thrives on ambiguity, concealment, and gradual revelation of truth (Bailey, 2015). The grouping of the two genres allows for the exploration of the inner emotional landscape, psychological trauma, and the intricacies of memory and identity (Suprpti et al., 2023). In narratives where characters deal with grief, trauma, or loss, mystery often serves as a narrative structure that reflects their emotional fragmentation, while magical realism provides symbolic language to articulate

what is not emotionally expressed (Sumaryani, 2021). These connections have established very substantially in contemporary literature that delivers themes of dislocation, cultural identity, or psychological oppression.

Both mystery and magical realism in literature functions as a potent means of social reflection and criticizing societal norms and political structures. Authors like Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende utilize magical realism to tackle social and political issues, with García Márquez examining the dynamics of power and societal decay, while Allende focuses on personal resilience in oppressive environments (Herrera, 2024). In Angolan literature, fantastical elements underscore disillusionment with neoliberal politics, exemplified by Ndalú de Almeida, who critiques social inequality through magical themes (Waller, 2023). Similarly, John Updike employs magical realism in Brazil to explore race and identity, revealing the complexity of social relationships in a multiracial society (Sayyid, 2024). This genre not only increases narrative depth but also prompts readers to engage in social critique, deepening their understanding of cultural and political realities (Hussain et al., 2022). By incorporating fantastic elements, it encourages reflection more profoundly on reality and perception.

The exploration of magic realism in some studies also found other issues other than social criticism behind mystery and magic realism. Prasetyohadi *et al.* (2018) show that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* features minimal elements of magic realism, which helps distinguish magical events from natural ones. Similarly, Hasanah *et al.* (2018) examine how magic realism highlights trauma and mystery, exhibiting the genre's ability to represent complex and often appalling experiences. Carlsen (2018) emphasized that magic realism and orientalism are used to both idealize and stereotype Japanese Americans in Japanese American literature, reflecting a Western perspective on Japanese culture. Suwandana & Supratno (2023) found out that in local Indonesian ritual, magic realism exists in Indonesian society and became a part of culture.

The urgent study of magical realism focuses on two novels: *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida* by Clarissa Goenawan (2020) and *The Distance Between Us* by Reyna Grande (2012). Both relate to the themes of loss, identity, and understanding. Goenawan's novel tells the story of a student in Tokyo who mysteriously commits suicide, exploring his hidden struggles and the complexity of friendship and love with the background of Japan society. Grande's memoir recounts his difficult childhood in Mexico and the emotional pain of family separation due to immigration, highlighting the resilience and experiences of immigrants. This magical perspective analysis in both novels allows the reader to understand the deeper emotional truth and transformative journey of the characters.

Although much has been done on magical realism, there is still a significant gap in research linking magical realism to the element of mystery, especially in cross-cultural contexts. The existing literature has indeed provided a basic understanding of this genre, but not many have explored in depth how magical realism and mystery interact with each other in the novels *The Distance Between Us* by Reyna Grande and *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida* by Clarissa Goenawan which are set in different cultures. This study aims to fill

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this gap by analyzing how the combination of the two elements forms a distinctive narrative and full of social meaning. Examining this aspect is important because it can broaden understanding of genre dynamics, enrich cross-cultural comparative analysis, and offer new perspectives in the development of literary theory. Through this approach, the research is expected to show how cultural contexts influence the use of magical realism and mystery in uncovering complex social and existential themes, while demonstrating the contribution of both to narrative forms and functions globally.

METHOD

The writer employed a qualitative descriptive method to examine ritual and magic realism in *The Distance Between Us* and *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumiwa*. The qualitative approach was also selected for its effectiveness in understanding and describing cultural phenomena, allowing for detailed exploration of the novels' themes (Cresswell, 2022). Data was primarily drawn from the novels' narration and dialogues, with supplementary insights from academic sources. The research process involved reading the novels, noting relevant passages, and organizing data according to thematic and structural elements (Kasih, 2018; Kasih et al., 2021). The writer followed a systematic approach in doing analysis, including classification, interpretation, and evaluation, guided by Faris's theories on magic realism, to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these themes were represented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study discovers how cultural contexts shape the use of magical realism and mystery to carry complex social and existential themes, accentuating their narrative purpose across global literature. The discussion focuses on three key areas: mystery as the core of irreducible elements, the interplay of fact and enchantment in the phenomenal world, and the blurred boundaries between dream and reality within unsettling doubts.

Mystery as the Core of Irreducible Elements

Mystery plays a crucial role in magical realism, as it bridges the gap between the ordinary and the extraordinary, fostering an atmosphere where the supernatural blends seamlessly with the real (Powell, 2010). In irreducible elements, the mysterious nature of these elements, which resists logical interpretation, is directly related to the essence of the mystery. In the novel *The Distance Between Us*, the real-life mystery is present in the lives of Mago, Carlos and Reyna when her mother is about to overtake her father in the United States. The loss of such a long figure made it create the imagined figure of "The Man Behind the Glass"

'I looked at the photo in my arms and took in Papi's black wavy hair, full lips, wide nose, and slanted eyes shifted slightly to the left. I wished, as I always did back then—as I still do now—that he were looking at me, and not past me. But his eyes were frozen in that position, and there was nothing I could do about it. 'Why are you taking her away?' I asked the Man Behind the Glass. As always, there was no answer.' (Grande, 2012, p. 10)

The presence of "the Man Behind the Glass" is inherently mysterious and magical. This figure is not fully explained or tied to the reality of the narrator's world. The glass can symbolize the barrier between different realms or states of existence, adding a layer of magical realism. The existence and role of this Man remained ambiguous, defying simple rational explanations. The description of Papi's eyes being "*frozen in that position*" introduces a surreal, almost supernatural element. Although the photograph does capture a moment in time, the narrator's longing for Papi to see them rather than pass them gives the photograph a sense of life and will. This longing for change in a static image touches on the magical, as it implies a desire for an inanimate object to have a living quality.

Detailed descriptions of Papi's physical features and the act of holding a photo are based on reality. These elements make the scene understandable and real. '*The Man Behind the Glass*' and '*his eyes frozen gaze*' introduce elements that cannot be explained by reality alone. The implied authority of this Man and the narrator's interaction with him is in the space where the magical and the real meet.

According to Fari's theory, irreducible elements are essential for understanding the correlation between mystery and magical realism. These elements, which cannot be easily explained or rationalized, serve to deepen the sense of mystery in a narrative. In this context, "the Man Behind the Glass" depicts elements that cannot be reduced. Its presence, which is inexplicable and enigmatic, corresponds to Fari's idea that certain aspects of a story reject logical interpretation. This is in line with the essence of magical realism, where the ordinary and the extraordinary coexist seamlessly. Glass barriers add to this complexity, symbolizing the boundaries between different realities or states of existence.

The description of the Papi eye being "frozen in that position" introduces an element of magical realism. Fari's theory suggests that such irreducible elements create a bridge between the real and the magical, increasing the depth and mystery of the narrative. The narrator's longing for static images to come to life illustrates this interaction between reality and the magical, as it highlights the desire for the impossible, a hallmark of magical realism. The vivid descriptions of Papi's physical features and the photographs associate the narrative with reality, while the irreducible elements, *the Man Behind the Glass* and the frozen gaze create a layer of mystery and magic. This interaction is in line with Fari's theory, describing how irreducible elements deepen the relationship between mystery and magical realism in the story.

In the novel *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*, the author emphasizes magical elements that transcend human comprehension, yet still appear real and ordinary, forming the core of magical realism. Characters such as Fumi Yanagi, who can communicate with spirits and meet Ruri, a supernatural presence, at the age of thirteen, show how rituals and magical realism are intertwined. Fumi performs special rituals such as meditation and uses certain objects to communicate with spirits, which deepens magical experiences in everyday life. The connection between mystery and magical realism is seen in the way these elements are presented, where Fumi and Ruri's bond develops

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deeply and defies logic, until Fumi is determined to introduce Ruri to his mother, uniting their lives in a mysterious spirit world.

This linking of mystery with magical realism allows the narrative to discover trauma in an intimate yet elusive way, present the reader a glimpse into the emotional depths of the characters without ever fully solving the puzzle of their pain. The mystery thus becomes a reflection of the character's disjointed psychological state, especially in the case of Miwako, whose decision to culminate her life is never fully explicated, but rather proposed through symbolic and emotional clues embedded in the magical structure of the story. The unidentified develops a space where healing or sympathetic is possible, even if only partially. In the end, the mystery is not meant to be resolved but to be felt, making upset a livelihood, occurrence that changes throughout the novel.

As the narrative progresses, this encounter between extraordinary forces and mysterious events promises to uncover the deep truth and embark on an incredible journey. Together, Fumi and Ruri will enter a path where the boundary between the visible and the invisible fades, and the power of the human soul is tested beyond the limit. It is discovered that Fumio takes his mother to the backyard and waves towards Ruri. *"Look, she's over there." "Where?" Fumio's mother narrowed her eyes. "I don't see her."* (Goenawan, 2020, p. 217). When Fumio invites his mother to meet his friend, Ruri, his mother can't see Ruri while Fumio can see her. This begins to invite the reader to question the status of the events and characters in the quote. In this context, there are irreducible magical causes and effects that are explained with little or no comment, as well as ideas about extraordinary phenomena and events that may in reality seem fantastic.

In other parts, the reader might be thinking about who Ruri really is. The possibility is that Ruri is not a girl or a human, but rather a dead creature or what we call a spirit. In the next section, Fumio's throat feels suffocated, leaving him dehydrated and his breath panting. Although his father's words of warning echoed in his mind, he mustered up the courage to speak, even though the burden of his confession felt heavy in the air. *"We cannot be friends," he uttered, his voice tinged with sorrow, "for you are not real."* (Goenawan, 2020, p. 218). This statement reveals who Ruri really is. In this statement, a character reveals that they can't be friends with other people because the person is not real. The character's voice is filled with sadness, suggesting that this awareness or recognition is a source of sadness for them.

Without further context or information about the characters and their relationships, it is difficult to determine the exact identity of Ruri and what it means for her to be "not real." However, based on the given statement, it can be inferred that Ruri might possess some qualities or characteristics that make her seem unreal or disconnected from the reality of the speaker. The statement may indicate that Ruri is perceived as someone who is not genuine, possibly hiding her true self or presenting a façade to the world. It could also suggest that she lacks authenticity or is not emotionally available for a genuine connection or friendship. Additionally, it is possible that the speaker's perception of Ruri being

"not real" could be metaphorical, indicating a fundamental disconnect between their worldviews or values.

In this novel, Fumio plays a significant role in Miwako's life as a loyal and caring friend, providing crucial emotional support and helping her overcome past trauma. The passage illustrates Fumio's emotional struggle: *"Fumio had no idea why he was crying. Ruri wasn't a real person, anyway. She was a wandering spirit who had found her way to the shrine. No one was able to see her except Fumio. He'd trusted that she was a friend and gotten hurt"* (p. 218). This highlights Fumio's vulnerability as he faces the painful truth that Ruri, whom he trusted, is not real.

In addition to Ruri, Fumio can see and communicate with Miwako's spirit, who is disguised as Miwako's deceased brother, Eiji. This is reflected in the dialogue:

"Just because you've got an explanation for what's happening, doesn't mean you actually understand... I saw spirits appear and disappear, roaming among the living. A few of them don't even know they're dead. Other times, they'll take the form of someone else to trick me. Wandering spirits like you are everywhere, and I'm the only one who sees them" (Goenawan, 2020, p. 223-224).

This interaction underscores the boundaries between reality and the supernatural blur, presenting a world where magical events coexist with the mundane. According to Faris (2004), such events fall into the category of irreducible magic, which challenges conventional logic. Chanady (2021) notes that in magical realism, reality and magic coexist without questioning the origins of each. This narrative often explores the cultural space between the living and the dead, enhancing our understanding of life, death, and rebirth.

The presence of unresolved mysteries enhances the depth of magical realism, inviting readers to question the nature of reality itself. In both *The Distance Between Us* and *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*, mystery is not only a narrative tool but also an integral aspect of how characters interact with their environments and the unknown forces that shape their lives. In *The Distance Between Us*, *The Man Behind the Glass* serves as a mysterious entity that defies explanation. The narrator attributes authority and consciousness to a static image, questioning its presence as something beyond reality. This unknowable quality mirrors the broader theme of magical realism, where rational interpretations fail to fully grasp the significance of supernatural elements. The fact that the narrator expects a response from this imagined figure reinforces the theme of mystery, as it leaves readers pondering whether this figure holds a hidden truth or simply represents an internalized longing. Similarly, in *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*, the mysterious nature of Ruri and her ambiguous existence serve as key elements of magical realism. Fumio's interactions with Ruri create uncertainty about her true nature—whether she is a ghost, a figment of his imagination, or something else entirely. This uncertainty adds a layer of mystery that sustains the tension between reality and the supernatural (Fangyuan, 2023). The passage where Fumio's mother fails to see Ruri intensifies this enigma, highlighting how the perception of reality varies between characters.

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By incorporating the theme of mystery, magical realism challenges conventional notions of truth and perception. The presence of unexplained supernatural phenomena, such as *The Man Behind the Glass* and Ruri, forces both characters and readers to navigate a space where reality and fantasy are indistinguishable. This blurring of boundaries heightens the emotional and philosophical depth of the narratives, reinforcing the idea that not all mysteries are meant to be solved (Sugiarti et al., 2022). Instead, they serve to enrich the storytelling experience, allowing readers to engage with the unknown in a way that mirrors real-life uncertainties.

Fact and Enchantment in the Mysterious Phenomenal World

In magical realism, the boundary between fact and enchantment often lies in the depiction of the phenomenal world - a space that feels both familiar and mysterious. Realistic elements such as place, time, and objects serve as key markers that distinguish magical realism from pure fantasy (Tiwari, 2021). This distinction becomes especially significant when readers are drawn into a sense of uncertainty, questioning what is real and what is imagined. The narrative often cultivates a quiet mystery, where the ordinary is infused with the inexplicable. One of the central elements in this interplay is the setting: a phenomenal place that mirrors the real world yet is subtly imbued with wonder and enigma. Faris (2004) explains that the phenomenal world in magical realism comprises two types of facts—those grounded within the text and those rooted in historical reality. Both function as anchors, grounding the magical elements while preserving an atmosphere of unresolved mystery, keeping the story suspended between the real and the unreal.

In *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida*, the real phenomenal world in the text is described by mentioning the name of the place, namely the Todaiji Temple that Ryusei visited.

'I went to Todaiji Temple,' I said. 'Remember that time we went there together? After I was accepted to Waseda.' (Goenawan, 2020, p. 225)

The depiction of the real, phenomenal world in the text through Todaiji Temple makes the view that this world is very real for the characters in the story, even though for the readers or spectators, these magical and magical elements feel very amazing and beyond reason. The author creates a phenomenal world by bringing the Todaiji Temple into an element of magical realism that differentiates

it from fantasy stories because it creates space as in the real world. Through the integration of the phenomenal world, the narrative achieves a delicate balance. The magical and the real become intertwined, yet the fundamental framework of the world remains unaltered. This allows for the exploration of fantastical possibilities without losing touch with concrete reality. Realistic description creates fiction that resembles the real world we live in by using lengthy details (Faris 2004, p. 14). While the real world is phenomenal on a historical basis, it is well known that Todaiji Temple is the most famous building located in the city of Nara, Japan, and is also home to the world's largest bronze Vairocana Buddha statue. This temple was built because there were a series of natural disasters such as food shortages due to abnormal weather and big earthquakes so the Emperor of that century, namely Emperor Shomu thought, *"Let's protect Japan with the power of Buddha,"* and built Todaiji Temple. The author also provides a description of the spiritual function of Todaiji Temple through Ryusei's activities which turn out to be visiting Todaiji Temple to pray, *"I just felt that I need to go there to pray"* (Goenawan 2020, p.225). Todaiji Temple is a sacred place that functions as a religious, educational, and spiritual center for Buddhists in Japan such as a tribute to the Vairocana Buddha statue, a place of offerings and meditation where visitors can pray, worship, and respect Buddha and seek peace and enlightenment through practice meditate in a serene environment. The temple's historical significance as a renowned Buddhist site is well-documented, its inclusion in the narrative infuses the story with a palpable sense of authenticity.

Through this phenomenal world, magical realism makes events and objects in the ordinary world intertwined with magical elements without changing the framework of the real world (Sayyid, 2024). The author creates stories that explore the possibilities of this world that exceed everyday regularities and actual reality which allows the author to create a mysterious and magical atmosphere, without leaving a solid foundation of reality because it is realism in magical realism that provides a detailed description of certain events that exist in real life (Faris, 2004).

The Mystery of Dream and Reality in The Unsettling Doubts

In *The Distance Between Us*, the tension between dreams and reality, as explored through the intertwined themes of mystery and unsettling doubt, offers a powerful commentary on the immigrant experience. Faris (2004) observes that *"The reader may hesitate (at one point or another) between two contradictory understandings of events—and hence experiences some unsettling doubts, often 'hallucination or miracle?'"* (p.171). This ambiguity is linked to the magical events in the narrative. One might wonder whether the magical event is merely a product of the character's dream or hallucination, or if it truly happens as a miracle. Magical realism allows Grande to highlight the dissonance between the myth of *"El Otro Lado"* and the lived reality, illustrating how the pursuit of this dream can lead to a profound sense of doubt and identity crisis. The father's journey embodies this struggle, as he navigates the space between the magical expectations of success and the unsettling doubt that reality imposes.

"Like most immigrants, my father had left his native country with high expectations of what life in El Otro Lado would be like. Once reality set

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in, and he realized that dollars weren't as easy to make as the stories people told made it seem, he had been faced with two choices: return to Mexico empty-handed and with his head held low, or send for my mother. He decided on the latter, hoping that between the two of them, they could earn the money needed to build the house he dreamed of. Then he would finally be able to return to the country of his birth with his head held high, proud of what he has accomplished" (Grande, 2013, p. 8)

The passage presents the dreams of Grande's father as something akin to a magical transformation, a hopeful vision of life in "*El Otro Lado*" (the United States), where wealth and success seem within easy reach. The reality, however, is starkly different. The "*high expectations*" that the father carries are metaphorically shattered by the harsh realities he encounters, leading to a profound sense of doubt. This doubt unsettles the father's once clear vision, casting a shadow over the American dream he initially pursued with confidence.

In this context, magical realism can be seen in the way Grande juxtaposes the dream-like qualities of the father's expectations with the harsh, unforgiving reality he faces. The belief in an easy path to prosperity is akin to a magical thought, a narrative that defies the real, economic, and social struggles that many immigrants face. The "unsettling doubt" emerges as the disillusionment with this narrative—a realization that the stories told about "*El Otro Lado*" are as much myth as they are reality. The decision to "*send for my mother*" instead of returning to Mexico symbolizes a clinging to this fading dream, an attempt to salvage the magical belief in the possibility of success, despite the growing doubt. The father's hope that "*between the two of them*" they can achieve the dream reflects a desperate grasp at the fantastical, trying to force reality to conform to the magical expectations he once held.

The passage also touches on identity, particularly in the phrase "*return to the country of his birth with his head held high.*" The father's sense of self-worth is tied to his ability to succeed in the United States and then return to Mexico as a triumphant figure. This identity, however, is destabilized by the doubt that creeps in when his dreams do not align with reality. The once clear path to success becomes clouded, and his identity is left in a state of flux, unsettled by the doubt that his efforts may not lead to the desired outcome.

The issue of "*El Otro Lado*" in the novel *The Distance Between Us* also brings mystery within. In the novel, Reyna Grande introduces the concept of "*El Otro Lado*" (the Other Side) in a way that blends the real and the surreal, a hallmark of magic realism. The term "*El Otro Lado*" refers to the United States, but it is presented not just as a geographical location but as an almost mystical force that disrupts and reshapes the protagonist's reality.

"In 1980, when I was four years old, I didn't know yet where the United States was or why everyone in my hometown of Iguala, Guerrero, referred to it as El Otro Lado, the Other Side. What I knew back then was that El Otro Lado had already taken my father away. What I knew was that prayers didn't work, because if they did, El Otro Lado wouldn't be taking my mother away, too" (Grande, 2013, p. 3)

The unsettling doubt in this passage stems from the tension between the tangible and the intangible. As a child, Reyna perceives *El Otro Lado* not as a real place, but as a mysterious force that takes her parents away. This unknown

power creates fear and confusion, especially when prayers fail to bring comfort. El Otro Lado becomes both a physical destination and a looming enigma. It is as an invisible presence shaping lives in Iguala. Its mystery deepens the emotional weight of the narrative, as it exists not only in reality but also in whispered conversations and unspoken fears, casting a shadow of uncertainty over Reyna's world.

A frontier world that raises doubts and invites questions that exist when readers experience two conflicting understandings of magic and the reality of events. The doubts contained in *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida* contain elements that are irreducible or beyond human logic so that they raise doubts for the reader because the reader will feel several contradictory things, as happened when Chie saw the tree where Miwako Sumida hanging herself suddenly catches fire when Chie and Ryusei return to visit the tree, "*The tree Miwako Sumida had hanged herself from was engulfed in flames.*" (Goenawan, 2020, p. 164). Readers may say that this event is a natural thing because it was caused by extreme weather, but readers will also experience doubts because actually, the weather was fine, raising questions about why the weather suddenly changed drastically to extreme and lightning struck the tree where Miwako Sumida was hanging. self. Readers' doubts are further tested when the fire that burns the tree where Miwako hanged herself does not go out, as shown in the quote below.

"The tree was still burning despite the rain and the buckets of water being thrown onto it. Oddly, while the fire wouldn't die down, it wasn't spreading either. The tree continued to burn, the villagers' efforts seeming to have no effect at all." (Goenawan, 2020, p. 166)

In the quotation above, narration tells about the strangeness of the tree. The fire did not go out even though it rained very heavily. The additional water given by residents pouring water on the tree in droves could also work to stop the fire.. The fire did not also spread to other parts of the forest, but really only burned the tree where Miwako Sumida hanged herself. This condition obscures the real and magical space by presenting two conflicting events that raise doubts from the reader to understand the event. There are three variations of the doubt based on Faris's explanation (2004, p. 17), namely doubts triggered by the text, doubts triggered by the nature of the object, and doubts caused by the cultural background of the reader themselves. In this case, the reader's doubts are triggered by the text and properties related to the tree where Miwako hanged herself.

Doubts will remain in the reader. If readers are closer to magical culture and mystical logic, then the presence of magic in literary works will not make them feel awkward or confused because doubts are often triggered by different belief systems found in magical realism (Faris, 2014). Readers may struggle to make sense of two conflicting events and then experience unsettling doubts. In this characteristic, it is as if the magical incident that occurred is doubtful and at the same time justified. This is reinforced by Faris' statement that magical realism is like a dream, but on the other hand, there are opinions that justify this incident. The writer's doubts as a reader were refuted and found that this event was classified as magical because the narration explained that before the tree-burning incident. Chie told one big secret about Miwako that Miwako had

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never told anyone besides Chie, “*Chie knew they shouldn't be speaking ill of a person who'd passed away, but she couldn't accept Miwako's suffering.*” (Goenawan 2020, p. 162-163). This explains that Chie is determined to tell Miwako secrets to Ryusei that she shouldn't have told.

In the end, the only casualty was that one tree. What was left was a blackened, hollow monument. Chie thought the whole episode must be a message from Miwako. But what was she trying to say? (Goenawan 2020, p. 166)

The tree where Miwako hanged herself was chosen to be a magical object in which the tree is believed to be a supernatural medium by spirits, and in this case, it is believed that Miwako's spirit came through the intermediary of the tree where she ended her life as in the quote above. Spirits will come through intermediaries such as objects to convey messages, which were previously triggered by something. In addition, there is a lot of fantasy during the story when the reader hesitates between the abnormal, where an event can be explained according to the laws of the universe, and the extraordinary, which requires some adjustments in those laws.

Blending the Material and Spiritual

The mysterious quality of magical realism often arises from its seamless merging of the visible, material world with the invisible, spiritual realm. This blending does not simply introduce the supernatural for shock or spectacle, but rather to evoke deeper emotional and cultural truths that resist logical explanation. In magical realism, mystery is not a problem to be solved but a presence to be experienced. It lingers in the background of everyday life, coloring it with uncertainty and depth. As Faris (2004) notes, the genre retains a realist framework while allowing the magical to emerge naturally from it, thus preserving a sense of wonder that is grounded in the ordinary.

Merging living beings with the spiritual world has become one of the defining features of magical realism. Spirits, ghosts, dreams, and ancestral presences often enter the narrative without disrupting the realistic setting, creating a space where the boundary between the physical and the metaphysical is not fixed but fluid. This merging deepens the atmosphere of mystery because it refuses to explain or resolve the magical—it simply lets it be. The spiritual elements are accepted as part of life, not questioned, which reinforces the genre's unique relationship with mystery: a quiet acknowledgment of forces that exist beyond rationality. The characters often engage with the unseen not with fear, but with familiarity and reverence, underscoring how magical realism invites readers to inhabit a world where mystery is intrinsic, not extraordinary.

Merging the living things with the spiritual world have become the characteristics in Chicano novels, including *The Distance Between Us*. Mrs Anderson, the teacher of Chicano students, reminds the students to prepare things in order to celebrate Halloween. She introduces the project and applies, “*things like witches and black cats, ghosts and pumpkins made from poster and tissue paper*” (Grande, 2007, p. 32) to prepare Halloween day in the U.S. She also reminds the culture in Mexico, in the Day of the Dead celebrations as something

like Halloween ritual. She adds, “We cut out skeletons, connected the bones with clips, and hung them on our door to announce the arrival of this holiday called Halloween”.

This selected quotation from *The Distance Between Us* exemplifies the merging of different realms aspect of magic realism by juxtaposing the American celebration of Halloween with the Mexican tradition of the Day of the Dead. This cultural contrast highlights the narrator's transition between two distinct cultural realms, each with its own customs and spiritual significance. *The Day of the Dead*, with its rituals that honor deceased relatives and merge the living with the spiritual world, contrasts with the more decorative and commercialized Halloween. This intersection of different realms—cultural, spiritual, and emotional—reflects the narrator's blending of past and present, personal and cultural identities (Abella, 2016). The passage subtly conveys the magic realist notion of fluid boundaries between the living and the dead, illustrating the continued influence of the spiritual world in the narrator's life.

In merging realms, magical realism merges the magical world and the real world. This is viewed in terms of objects and is limited to three parts, namely, objects, places, and times as in the following quotation.

‘A lot of the spirits believe staying in places of worship will help them reincarnate faster,’ his father continued, ‘but we can’t be sure. Still, it’s worth trying if you have nothing to lose.’ ‘Do you think that was the reason Ruri came here?’ Fumio asked eventually. ‘Possibly,’ his father said. ‘I doubt she died in the vicinity of this shrine. Otherwise, we would’ve heard about it.’ (Goenawan, 2020, p. 218-219)

It is said that Fumio has an invisible friend, Ruri, who frequently appears around the shrine. The merging of the two worlds can be seen through the quote. The real world is depicted through the shrine which is always guarded by Fumio's family. On the other hand, the magical world is described through the sentence *“A lot of the spirits believe staying in places of worship will help them reincarnate faster,”* (Goenawan, 2020). In this case, the temple, which acts as a representation of the real world that should be used by humans as a place of religion and spirituality, such as worshiping the gods, praying, and reading holy books, is also seen as a haven for spirits who have not finished their business in the world and wish to be reincarnated as soon as possible.

In this process of merging the magical world and the real world, magical realism has melted the boundaries between the real and magical worlds (Setiawan & Nurhidayah, 2022). This proves that the real and the magical can coexist because one of the characteristics of the unified nature itself is when the magical world associated with traditional beliefs is combined or integrated with the modern real world, Faris (2004: 21) so that the presence of merging realms in magical realism helps magic realism stories no longer confuse readers or viewers between logic and fantasy (Mahmud et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *The Distance Between Us* by Reyna Grande and *The Perfect World of Miwako Sumida* by Clarissa Goenawan effectively utilize magic realism, as theorized by Wendy B. Faris, to explore complex themes of

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grief, loss, and identity. By incorporating Faris's characteristics of magic realism such as irreducible elements, the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, and merging realms, both novels challenge conventional perceptions of reality. Additionally, the role of mystery in these narratives heightens the sense of ambiguity and unease, drawing readers deeper into the stories as they seek to unravel hidden truths and unresolved questions. This interplay between mystery and magic realism not only sustains suspense but also reinforces the novels' thematic depth. Ultimately, this research affirms the power of magic realism in contemporary literature, highlighting its capacity to convey profound human experiences and adding to the genre's richness and complexity.

AUTHOR STATEMENTS

E. Ngestirosa.E.W.K was responsible for data collection, data analysis, and collaboratively writing the findings with Author 2. Additionally, author 1 drafted the discussion section and conducted multiple rounds of proofreading before submission. **Anggi Wulandari** contributed to data analysis, co-authored the findings, formatted the manuscript according to the journal template, and gathered relevant sources.

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