

Re-enchanting the International: Magical Politics and Where to Find It

Written by Shambhawi Tripathi

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SHAMBHAWI TRIPATHI, SEP 6 2023

I'm sitting on a recently built floor of the University library. So recent; it smells more of lacquer and resin, than knowledge. There are new swivel chairs; plastic film stretched against the grey fabric, in anticipation of students who are perhaps, choosing brighter furniture in the peak of summer. Nothing says summer like patio chairs on the sidewalk. Beyond the glass wall, lavender and cornflower bushes are competing for the attention of fat vibrating bumblebees. The August sun in the east of Scotland is known for reluctance, but today, it is certain. I register how sitting in a cube of slant but insistent sunlight, feels different in Scotland, from what it did in India. I think about the politics of sunlight; an underexamined area in decolonial writing. The lavender seems to be winning bumblebee hearts. Cornflowers are gracious and blue, even in defeat. Maybe bees should write about world politics, seeing as they enact and enable so much of it. Would library shelves smell honeyed then? Sunlight is still political.

In my recent article, I lament the lack of 'magic' in the discipline of International Relations. While it isn't an easy endeavor to seek room for surprise in a discipline that has historically sought to rid itself of it, *lamenting*, as a critical feminist method, enables me to tease out an imaginative framework and cultivate it, in concert with existing scholarship which share my curiosities and follow them along different pathways. In addition to acknowledging the failure of existing frameworks in grappling with curiosities which exceed them, a lament activates affective desires for alternative imaginaries. The political work of lamenting demands that we pause and pay closer attention to the textures and contours of the very world(s) we are writing about. The *pause*, then, becomes a political moment for noticing and recovering the *relations* that make up the *international*. How do the political acts of lamenting, pausing, and noticing go missing in mainstream theories of world politics? What worlds do we stand to lose, or have already lost, in the absence of such imaginations, and how can we recover them?

It is in the imagination of alternative structures of attention – that are attuned to seeing emotional relations which (un)make the international, as the very substance of politics – that I am invested in. My doctoral work revolves around rewriting the international by gleaning emotional-relational and magical insights from the literary genre of magical realism. I read novels from across different geographical and temporal moments and write thematic essays on the ways in which the affective spellwork that abounds in such writing, challenges and transforms the very notion of the political. I must admit, that while it has taken me almost three years to come up with that neat summary statement, the process has been a delightfully and frustratingly messy one. The reason it's important to admit this, is not to place forewarnings around my work, but to argue that it is an ongoing learning process; where rather than beginning from any self-assured starting point, I'm trying to learn what I'm doing *while* doing it.

It is politically important to admit unfamiliarity, in order to notice, (re)imagine, and ask questions about even the seemingly most familiar of things. As a genre of world literature, magical realism insists on finding the magical in the ordinary, and in doing so, invites us to reimagine the political through the emotional-relational experiences of those who inhabit it. The codes of the magical, in such writing, are not subsidiary to, but rather illuminate and make bearable the codes of the real (Quayson 1995). The magical then; is not a leap away from reality, but an emotional-relational improvement upon it. In my research, human and more-than-human subjects resist the limits of, and also make palpable, alternative contours of the international. Ghosts return to haunt dictators into building mirror palaces for the dead (*The Enlightenment of the Greengate Tree*), violence inflicted on the backs of slaves take the form of

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chokecherry trees (*Beloved*), magical doors transport war refugees to unknown countries (*Exit West*), children born at the stroke of midnight, are born with magical abilities and communicate telepathically about the future of a newly independent country (*Midnight's Children*), and prisoners give poetic names to camps and host celebrations with illusory orchestra, dining over detailed descriptions of festive food (*A Long Petal of the Sea*). It is this magical/political spellwork of emotional-relational humans- to insist on imagining hopeful ways of living through and even flourishing in annihilating conditions- that makes it incumbent upon us, to reimagine ways of writing and thinking about violence and hope in global politics.

It is by noticing the attachments which, even in the midst of destruction, remake the felt present into something habitable and potentially better, at least for the subject held in the attachment, that we can open up our imagination of the political (Berlant 2011). Magical realism, as a postcolonial form of writing, insists on attending to the intimate sites and relations as the global. It opens up the political, to include ambivalent moments, figures and stances, which often go missing from macro-theories of the international (Lisle 2016). In his Nobel Lecture, Gabriel García Márquez called for a reconsideration of Western standards of literature which often treat magical realist fiction as yet another form of fantasy literature. For Márquez, and other writers who call this genre home, what might seem as fantastical for some, is the only reliable means to narrate what is often an unbearable, oversized, and unbridled reality, for those who have and are trying to live (through) it.

For me, it is this insistence on imagination: of hope, love and ways of continuing to live in the midst of violence, through an insistence on emotional-relational retelling of reality, that makes magical realism politically important. Allowing its characters to act imaginatively from the dirt of enduring hardships, rather than demanding from them, heroic actions to clean up political crises (Stephens 2022), is what renders such writing as politically generous. It places an imperative upon recasting, rather than discarding the world that does not serve their needs and goals, by tending to emotional relations that make up the political (Tripathi 2023). How we write about the world constitutes a deeply political choice; one that requires pressing closer to the worlds we are curious about, before we can question them. Rather than ending the story with decay and abandoning hope, such stories make us think about how collaborative survival might help us navigate choppy waters (Tsing 2015).

There has been a gentle, steady stream of narrative scholarship in International Relations over the past decade, by scholars who recognise the foreclosures that disciplinary forms of writing have set, to the possibilities of what we can think, and dream of, as the political. This has resulted in turning to autobiographical, fictive, poetic, autoethnographic, and other narrative forms of writing, vibrantly expanded the grammar of the discipline to include stories as a political form of knowledge. Among others, I am deeply indebted to, Jenny Edkins' (2013) work on storytelling in IR. Her question- "what do stories do that other forms of writing cannot," is a curiosity that I carry as a bookmark to my writing (and living) to mark the anxieties, possibilities, and indeed the responsibilities and costs of being a storyteller, both for and beyond the discipline.

Stories, as a form of knowledge, are often treated as wholly inadmissible, or undoubtedly generous, within disciplinary debates. The experience of working with stories however, is one of developing a political intimacy with doubt (Inayatullah 2001). Rather than positing stories as *naturally* inclined to a kinder politics, my research reflects on the politics of narratives and our own starting points. Rather than rushing to resolve or explain away the emotional-relational quagmires that plague and complicate the experience of the political in these novels, I often let my writing sit under the skylight of doubt, and bake in it. My writing then, is as tentative, complex, and contradictory, as the human and more-than-human subjects who inhabit the novels I read, and offers an alternative understanding of politics; one where it is possible to remain with doubt, and write with it.

Recognising that stories, are as vulnerable to exploitation as other research methods, is not a case against turning towards them. It is in fact, an invitation to think carefully about which stories we wish to tell about the international. Critical scholars have lamented how the relentless search for causality in IR is so powerful, that nothing remains alive (Muppidi 2013). Feminist scholars in the discipline and beyond have rightly called for a politics of slow scholarship (Mountz et al. 2015), which allows us to step outside institutional expectations and timescales, if only to let a little air into the lungs of our bodies and our writing. Cultivating space for research which builds in pockets to exhale, for the researcher and the research subjects; which recognises that creativity is often simultaneously nourishing and

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exhausting, and demands a pause, in the midst of, and sometimes as an antidote to rush.

An engagement with stories encourages us to consider being stirred, as a valuable political goal. Working with fiction, indeed magical realist fiction, requires us to at least consider the possibility that we could be moved differently by stories, than we are by political arguments. It beckons us to acknowledge that perhaps the only way to address the biggest questions that inform and challenge our discipline, is by noticing the particular moments, sites and relations, where the political gets so immediate, so specific, it pinches. Rather than thinking of how we can use fiction or other forms of writing *for* IR, maybe a more imaginative project would be to consider how such writing disturbs and enlarges our glossary of politics. To prioritise emotional relations, is a way to prioritise the (re)articulation of politics as a project *of* living, and the discipline as a space *for* enacting such politics.

At a recent international conference, during a panel on Literary IR, someone asked me a brilliant question, – “What do we want from novels as thinkers of politics, what are we hoping to find there?” I found her curiosity, posed in the grammar of *wants* much more generative than the more canonical question- “What can fiction do for IR?”- a question that seeks to put fiction, and indeed all imagination, in service of the discipline. I did not arrive at magical realist fiction with a list of research questions. It was a deep sense of disenchantment, with the ways in which writing about politics in the discipline of IR sets serious limits to imagining the very extent and nature of the political, and a desire to imagine otherwise, that pulled me towards it.

I have often felt the compulsion to define my research by what it’s not. To distinguish fiction from falsity, magic from trickery, surprise from escapism. While the demands to justify the intentions of our research is welcomed by feminists as a route to making our own work sharper (Krystalli 2023), it is also imperative to let our research find alternative starting points which do not and possibly cannot, emerge within the existing limits of a discipline’s grammar. Fiction has its own wants, which are often different from and more generous than disciplinary agendas of problem-solving. If directing our attention to emotional relations that make up the world(s) is what threatens foundational iterations of the political, it is a risk worth taking, if only to ask- what would happen, if we did?

Research questions can appear beyond the usual sites of our inquiry, sometimes where we least expect them (Sylvester 2009). In my research, questions arise as longings, and methods entail noticing and attending to the multiple longings in the novels I read- for home(s), relation(s) and crucially, for living- as emotional-relational spellwork which conjure up magical iterations of the political. It is not often that we think of disciplines as avenues for our longings. Longings, unlike questions, do not need fixed answers, but rather, tentative ones. There are curiosities which need sustained companionship, continued tending, and the possibility of re-enchantment with what we understand as the political.

I am not trying to solve anything, through my research on fiction, but trying to imagine alternative ways of inhabiting and living (in) the political. This doesn’t imply that there aren’t problems in the international which need answering. What it means is, that it should be possible to imagine *living* alongside, and sometimes even in, resistance to the solving going on around us. To insist, that to pause and attend to the hum of the bumblebees in the world in a cube of sunlight, can sometimes be the most radical political act of all.

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About the author:

Shambhawi Tripathi is a PhD candidate at the University of St Andrews, and her doctoral work seeks to engage

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emotional lives in magical realist fiction as a transformative “magical” way of doing global politics. Her work has appeared in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* and *The Journal of Narrative Politics*. Alongside her interest in feminist, postcolonial and emotional stories about the world, she is politically interested in peonies, poetry and puffins.