

Memory and the Construction of Perception toward Magic Call in the novel *The First Phone Call From Heaven* by Mitch Albom

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Abstract

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengungkapkan persepsi penerima telepon magis dari surga tentang kebenaran sebuah peristiwa magis dalam novel *The First Phone Call from Heaven* karya Mitch Albom. Novel ini dianggap menggunakan format realisme magis yang mencampurkan antara kenyataan dan fantasi. Pergerakan persepsi karakter novel dari tidak memercayainya sebagai kebenaran menjadi sebagai kebenaran yang mutlak menjadi fokus penelitian ini. Permasalahan yang diangkat dalam penelitian ini ditelusuri dengan menggunakan kerangka teori yang dikemukakan oleh Linda Hutcheon tentang representasikan masa lalu dalam narasi. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa penerimaan tokoh dalam novel terhadap kejadian magis yang tidak dapat dipercaya menjadi sebuah kemutlakan yang tak terbantahkan melalui proses dialektika yang logis melalui ingatan masa lalu yang kemudian membangkitkan perasaan tokoh. Ketidakrasionalan suatu peristiwa dapat dirasionalkan dan diterima oleh akal dengan menampilkan masa lalu melalui ingatan tokoh. Ingatan memancing sentimental sehingga peristiwa yang rasional dapat diterima karena dukungan dari domain rasa bukan nalar. Sentimentalitas adalah strategi dalam narasi untuk mengaburkan antara real dan yang tidak real.

Key words: Novel, magic, Mitch Albom, reaction.

A. Background

The term magical realism has attracted many attention from both literary writers and literary critics. It was introduced by a South American writer who represented both magical and realism world in his novel. This, thus, influences African American writer such as Tony Morison in her *Beloved*. Salman Rushdie in his novel *Mid summer night Children*. Magical realism comes from two words, magical and realism. Realism is a rational perspective on reality, while magic is world view acceptance of supernatural things as a reality. Magical realism writers have

capabilities in forming a narration that illustrates a distorted, split world and incredible world for its cultural shift. Franz Roh, a critic of German art, found that magical realism is a way to represent, respond to the reality and describe in the puzzle of reality.

Mitch Albom, a famous spiritual novel writer, was found to use the magical realism form in his novel *The First Phone Call from Heaven* (2014). The novel narrates four citizens who received a phone call from heaven or from the afterlife. The acceptance of magic phone call from heaven is clearly described in the novel. At first, the novel depicts normal life of its characters until one of them admits the magical incidence in public and them spread widely through media. The first testimony of the magic call follows by other testimonies which later satisfy media's hungry for the unusual occurrences. The disruption between magic and realism is heated conflict that moves the plot of the novel. Unlike realism and romanticism novel which focus on moral value of the novel, the magical realism does challenge the definition of realism itself.

Following trend in literary discussion and writing, this article underlines that the emergence of magical realism form may have an certain intention as the invention of realism and romanticism. It might be a patron or a literary architecture which may ideologically generate a new men, which means a new culture. As it is both romanticism and realism functions as the architectural form that shape human perception. The emergence of new form, magical realism, may not free from such intention. It is not my intention here to compare those literary formations, yet I intend is to unveil that a new form of literature may propose of a new way of perceiving real and magical world. As Gramsci (2012, 46) said that literary form has been part of the struggle for a new man, a new subject and thus a new culture. From those assumptions, it is thus necessary to find out to examine structural element of the novel meet the new form. In other words, how is the magical which is generally defined as irrational accepted by rational and modern man in the novel.

B. Theoretical Framework

1. Magical Realism

It is important to note that the concept magical realism derived from realism which is a style of writing or a literary movement in the earlier Of 19th century. This style gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life. Modern criticism frequently insists that realism is not a direct or simple reproduction of reality (a 'slice of life') but a system of conventions producing a lifelike illusion of some 'real' world outside the text, by processes of selection, exclusion, description, and manners of addressing the reader. In its methods and attitudes, realism may be found as an element in many kinds of writing come out a century ago.

Magic is a conceptual system that asserts human ability to control the natural world such as events, objects, people, and physical phenomena by means of mystical, paranormal, or supernatural means. The term can also refer to the practices used by a person who asserts such influence, and to beliefs that explain various events and phenomena in such terms. In many cultures, magic is under pressure from, and in competition with, scientific and religious conceptual systems. Magical "refers to any

extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science," (Bowers 2004, 19).

The literary critics agree that "magical realism" emerged in 1925. This word appeared in writing of several critics such as Franz Roh in 1920, Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, Gabriel Garcia Marquez in Colombia, Gunter Grass in Germany and John Fowles in England. Franz Roh defines magical realism as: "the ability to create meaning (magic) with imagines the unaccountable things in unaccountable way". Although Roh's writing focused on art, Roh's statement then was applied to literary phenomenon that became famous by the term magical realism. Magical realism has writing technique used to change the form of daily reality into a distinctive form. This writing strategy performs as an effort to show a supernatural atmosphere in a realistic form.

In his book entitled "*Ordinary Enchantments Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*", Faris (2004: 1) defined magical realism as a mixture of realism and fantastic events that allow the magical look like growing naturally within the ordinary which then blurs the distinction between the magic and the ordinary. It means that the domain of magic comes disrupting the domain of ordinary that lead to the magic become real or reality. Faris (2004, 2) emphasized that narrative in magical realism used by the author to bring out the elements that had been hidden and unable to come in the literary work because of the domination of realistic form. This realistic form is originated from the rational thought that dominate philosophical thought of 20 century. Thus, the narrative technique of magical realism presents to modify realism. Realism which based on rationalism and materialism denied magical element in this life. This element re-emerged an seen as a creative and innovative trend that submerged narrative traditions in metropolitan center.

2. Memory as recollection of the past

Generally, memory is viewed as a particular content of the mind. However, if we look deeply and critically, memory is not merely contain of the mind, yet it consists of stories and narratives that writers tell about the past which contributes to the current sense of the self. These significant happenings which used to convey the meanings of our past experience are produced much in the same way as narrative; thus, identity and narration are most certainly activated by memory and retrieved by remembrance (O'Connel 1998, 32).

Gerard Genette analyzes the narrative dialectic between the past and the present which demonstrates how memory can plays narrative strategies that can demonstrate a suppressed past, resulting in a cultural recovery which, in turn, develops new relationships with the past. Identity, within the scope of a narrative of memory, evolves over time and is subject to the influence of history and the recognition of difference. Maurice Halbwach (1992) sees memory as one of the ways our consciousness connects experiences and images using language as medium.

Linda Hutcheon shows that in theory of postmodern, the narration of the past, in this context, personal memory, is not new, but it has been given a new designation which is considered as mode of totalizing representation. The function of this mode is to point the process by which the authors or writers of history, fiction or theory base their material coherent, continuous, unified, yet with an eye control and master the material. Controlling power using the past representation including personal memory

means that by recapturing an event and locating in the framework of history which thus lead to the unity of history control and order the fictionalization (63).

C. Analysis of The Novel *The First Phone Call From Heaven*

1. The Recipients Magic Call in the Novel.

To examine the reception of the disruption of magical world to the realistic world, four characters will be focused. The first character is Sullivan (Sully) Harding. Sully was an ex-prisoner trapped between his guilt to his late wife for unable to attend her funeral, and his pity to his only son who bring toy telephone waiting his mother's call from heaven after the news of a call from heaven spread in town. Yet, Sully does not believe it as a truth. Even, he tends to avoid to the conversation about the call from heaven (5).

The second character is Tess Rafferty illustrated to receive a phone call from his dead mother who passed away two years ago. Her beloved mother's call reminds her the memory of her beloved mother. The memory traps her between the illogical call and the fact that she received calls every Friday from heaven. Even after several call, she still hesitate to the fact that it was a call from heaven is a truth (1).

The third person who depicted to have received a call from heaven is Katherine Yellin. Katherine received a call from her sister, Diane. Diane and Katherine were very closed during her life. They passed many happy events in their life together, both the sad and the happy life. After receiving the call, she rushed to a pastor and admitting to have a miracle (5).

Jack Seller is the four persons who received a call from his late son. Jack is a police chief in a small town. At the first call, even though psychologically he is affected by the call, yet he denies his psychological reaction by his irrational thought by saying that "It can't be you" (2).

The novel displays different reactions of those characters when receiving the magical call. Most of them do not accept it as a truth. They act rationally, even though they are affected psychologically. Except Katherine who is described as a pious woman who come to church often. When having her first phone call, she rushes to meet a pastor and reacts very emotionally. The process of perceiving the call as false fact to magic and then become a truth is importance to follow in this novel.

2. Reaction and Perception Toward Magic Phone: From Magical Irrationality to A Believable Truth

a. The first phone call

The form of the novel has a significant role in designing the logic of the story. The logic of the story arranges that the recipients accept the magic call as a truth or falsehood. The use of personal memory in the novel to design the logical unity and to rationalize the acceptance of characters' perception in novel is very obvious as seen in four characters. In the first chapters, the author (Albom) focuses on four characters, Tess, Katherine, Jack and Sully. Each of them experiences a process after the first phone call from heaven. Tess, Jack and Sully are hardly believed such happening, yet, Katherine reacted and announce to the public.

At first Tess remains silent after the first call from her late mother from heaven. She still cannot believe and she assured that it was impossible. She is numb

and the phone fall from her hand. She concluded that it was illogical. When the second call came again, she was still doubts, yet the telephone affected her physically, and thus affected her psychologically. She remembered her mother's physic, her sound and her words when she was away and called her. The physical memories lead her to her mental memory of her mother. The story of the caller is the recollection and relocation of the story of her mother in the fiction as seen in the novel below.

Her mother *exited*, somewhere, somehow. She reviewed the latest conversation for the hundredth time.

Tess . . . Stop crying, darling."

"It can be you."

"I'm here safe and sound."

Her mother always said that when she called in from a trip-a hotel, a spa, even a visit to her relatives half an hour away. I'm here, safe and sound.

"This isn't possible."

"Everything is possible. I am with the Lord. I want to tell you about . . ."

"What? Mom? What?"

The line went silent. Tess stared at the receiver as if holding a human bone. It was totally illogical. She knew that. But a mother's voice is like no other; we recognize every lilt and whisper, every warble or shriek. There was no doubt. It was her. Tess drew her knees in to her chest .

This quotation shows that at the first call Tess said that "This isn't possible which means that she does not accept the telephone as a rational occurrence which can accept by reason. Rational and irrational are two opposing words, which define the ability of Tess,s intellectuality. Intellectuality may define people's normality or abnormality. They are connected to the faculty of their intellectual. Therefore, afraid of being accuse as irrational and less intellectual, after several call, Tess kept the magic call as the a secret from anyone. Yet, she began to obsess of waiting another telephone from her. This obsession is depicted has resulted an accident-his house burn down- for her too focus of her phone call from heaven. Even though she doubt of originality of the magic call, her feeling and memories of her mother intertwined with regularity of every Friday call from her mother affect his rational thought.

The belief or doubt of the telephone and the obsession are intertwined that play a large part in Tess life. In fact as the novel described, his rational thought may denied, yet when the faculty of her emotion has occupied, the slip of the two, the disruption of the emotion may occupy the rational thought. This means that the novel tend to show that the faculty of emotion is more powerful that the faculty of rationality.

Similar to Tess, Jack Sellers, a police chief, also portrayed to believe that the call from his son in heaven is an irrational. Jack felt his stomach tighten. He thought about the last time he'd seen his son, clean shaven with a soldier's tight haircut, disappearing through airport security en route to his third tour of duty. His last tour of duty. "It can't be you," Jack whispered (6). What is shown here is the novel depiction of Jack Seller' physical reaction which symbolizes the contradictory of his emotional to his intellectual rationality. The frequent of the telephone and the memory of his son led him to believe that it was her truly son who called her from heaven. Similar to

Tess, Jack kept it as a secret until six week when he met Tess who is obsessed with her telephone.

Another character who receives the magical phone is Katherine Yellin. In contrast to Jack and Tess who were doubt of the reality of the call from heaven, Albom illustrates Katherine to directly meet Pastor after receiving a call from her late sister. She has no objection, and even she believes that she to be the chosen one. Albom provides the reason for her action by presenting Katharine as a religious woman who has a close connection to the church in the Coldwater. Her religiosity is illustrated as a support of her direct acceptance without interfering of her rationality. For Albom, religiosity means irrationality as Katherine's reaction is illustrated as the opposite of Tess's and Jack's reaction of the first phone call as narrated in the novel when Katherine meets Pastor Warren.

“Your deceased sister called you?”

“This morning. I picked up the phone . . .”

She gripped her handbag and began to cry. Warren wondered if he should call someone for help.

“She told me not to worry,” Katherine rasped. “She said she was at peace.”

“This was a dream, then?”

“No! No! It wasn’t a dream! I spoke to my sister!”

Tears fell off the woman’s cheeks, dropping faster than she could wipe them away.

“We’ve talked about this, dear—”

“I know, but—”

“You miss her—”

“Yes—”

“And you’re upset.”

“No, Pastor! She told me she’s in heaven. . . . Don’t you see?” (Albom 2013, 25).

The quote illustrates the first call affected Katherine more emotional than other characters. The presence of her emotion allows the disappearance of her rationality. The combination of two creates her perception and thus acceptance to the call as a true call from heaven. It shows that emotional touch greatly contributes to form her assumption or perception. Her belief in the call as a truth led her not to hide the happening from the public; instead she announced the news at a congregation in the church. She cannot control herself and keep it as a secret while questioning the reality of the call as shown below:

“I got a phone call-

“Really, I must insist-“

“-from my *dead sister!*”

More gasps. She had their attention now. The sanctuary was so quiet, you could hear her unfold the paper.

“It was Diane. Many of you knew her. She dead two years ago, but her soul is alive in heaven. She told me!”

Warren fought to keep from shaking. He had lost control of the pulpit, a sin, in his mind, of the highest order.

“We first spoke that Friday morning,” Katherine continued, reading louder as she wiped tears with the back of her hand. “It was 10:41 a.m. And the next Friday, at 11:14 a.m., and last Friday at 7:02 in the evening. She said my name . . . she said . . . ‘Kath, the time has come to tell everyone. I’m waiting for you. We are all waiting.’”

She turned to the rear of the sanctuary. “*We are all waiting.*”

The congregation mumbled. From the pulpit, Warren watched them shifting in their seats, as if a wind were blowing through them.

He rapped his palm on the lectern.

“I must insist!” *Rap*. “Please! Everyone!” *Rap, rap!* “With all respect to our fellow congregant, we cannot know if this is real—

It is real, Pastor!”

A new voice came from the back of the church. It was deep and gravelly, and all heads turned to see a tall, burly man in a brown sports coat, standing up, his large hands on the pew in front of him. He was Elias Rowe, a longtime African American congregant who owned a construction business. (**Albom 2013, 21**)

Unlike other recipients, this religious woman who frequently attends congregation at her town church was described to directly believe that the call as a magical truth without questioning its truth or falsity. The novel seems to connect the irrationality of Katherine for his religious belief and the irrationality of the magical call which allow his emotionally uncontrolled spreading the news. Generated emotionally and the absence of the faculty of reason for her spirituality, Katherine, along the narrative, seems to be a negative representation.

The negative representation of Kathrine’s acceptance of magical without questioning and without doing further research on its truth shown has attracted media to cover the news and follow the life of Katherine as the addressee of the call. The media control of the happening allows the news spread uncontrolledly. The media whose task is to show a realistic magical occurrence may get benefit from the unusual news. The media does not care whether it covers reality or magical, yet, its intention is the news selling and makes benefit.

Those who affected by the media covered is Jules, a three years lonely boy. Jules is left by his late mother, Giselle, and accompanied by his guilty father Sullivan Harding who has just release from a prison. Since hearing the news, Jules is expecting a call from his mother, and his teacher gave her a toy phone to satisfy his dream. Seeing his son obsessed by his expectation, Sullivan Harding feels hurt and irritated by the news. Sully feels very frustrated to people who believe those phone as a truth. He tried hard to prove that the phone is a man made, and not a call from heaven.

2. After the first Call

From all those reaction to the first phone calls, it can be said that only Catherine directly believed it as a true call from heaven. Meanwhile Tess and Jack carefully accepted as a call from heaven. However, when the phone regularly rang every Friday, the two slowly accepted as a true as show the conversation between Jack and his son below:

It’s awesome, Dad.”

What does it look like?"
You don't see things. . . . You're inside them."
What do you mean?"
Like my childhood . . . I see it . . . So cool!"
Robbie laughed and Jack nearly broke down. The sound of his son's laughter.
It had been so long.
I don't understand, son. Tell me more."
Love, Dad. Everything around me . . . love-"(Albom 2013, 10)

The conversation unveils that Jack does not doubt the call as it was the first call. Yet, the conversation between the two flow well. He even address the caller "son" and he is illustrated emotionally connected to the conversation as he is described to nearly broke down. The word "so long" also shows that it has been a long time he did not hear the laughter, and the memory of his son's laughter stay in his mind and recollected by the call. He was eager to know more as he is said "tell me more."

Unlike Jack who began to believe the call. Sully could not believe it and summoned to do a research to prove that there is no such miracle. He felt disturbed by the way people changed, by his small town which was exposed by the media, by tourists who was willingness to see the miracle, and by his son who is obsessed waiting his mother call. The irrationality of the whole town led her to share his research to newspaper. This condition built two challenging contradictory arguments, the call from heaven as miracle and as a fake human made.

As a spiritual novel, Albom shows that the two are possible. The miracle is still part of the life. As Sully came to the end of his research, and found that a man had made the call, he himself experienced the call as his son expected. In his way proving the fake call, Horace Grey wrote him a letter admit to be the one who arranged eight fake calls from heaven. In fact, he found there were nine calls, one is from his wife. As shown below:

"Where should I begin?"
"Anywhere you want," the man said. "Why not-"
The line dead.
"Hello?" Sully said. "*Hello?*"
He looked at the phone.
"Damn it."
He held the display up to the small light. There was still battery power.
He turned it over in his hand.
He wanted. He wanted.
Moments later, it rang again.
"Sorry," Sully said, answering. "Did I lose you?"
"Never," a woman's voice said softly.
He stopped breathing. Giselle (Albom 2013, 296-297)

As it was described for his stubbornness to depend his rationality and his realistic belief, Sully should be ignored the call physically and mentally when he received a call from his beloved late wife. In the novel, Sully is depicted to affect both mentally and physically.

“He drifted swiftly like a spirit through the darkness. He was suddenly inside his apartment, coming down the hallway and turning into the doorway of Jules’s bedroom. There he saw, sitting on the edge of the boy’s bed, his wife, Giselle, as young and radiant as she had ever been”

Communicate.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” came the sound off his lips.

“It’s only for a moment. You have to go back.”

Sully felt nothing but lightness and warmth, complete relaxation, as if lying in summer grass when he was ten years old.

“No,” he said.

“You can’t be stubborn.” She smiled. “That’s not how it works.”

Sully watched her lean over Jules.

“So beautiful.”

“You should see him.”

“I do. All the time.”

Sully felt himself crying inside, but there were no tears, no change in his facial expression. Giselle turned as if she sensed his distress. “What is it?”

“You can’t be here,” he whispered.

“I’m always here.”

She pointed to a shelf, where the angel urn containing her ashes now sat (Albom 2013, 305-306)

This conversation is the dialog between Sully and his wife, Giselle, who first call and then present. This situation allowed Sully to suddenly changed his perception. He believes that magic is real. By his own experience, Sully accepted that the magical is presence on the real world. The world is also run by something illogical. The reality is the presence of unreal. The novel shows that the rationality of human is limited, and the feeling is powerful to generate people into perception. In this novel, experience is considered to be the most powerful shape the perception.

E. Conclusion

Memory of the loving ones affects character’s reaction to the phone call. Their connections to the past which move to the present keep construct people perceptions of the current condition. Emotional connections of the past affect both physically and emotionally. The rejection to their feeling and the submission to their rational faculty are significantly influence their physical body. The rational character is not affected emotionally by the call until it happens to himself. When his turn came, he both physically and emotionally moved.

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