
MAGICAL REALISM AND ABSURDITY IN *BEFORE THE COFFEE GETS COLD: TALES FROM THE CAFE*

Dhea Sekar Arum

Universitas Bangka Belitung

Email: dheasekar.a@gmail.com

Tri Arie Bowo, M.Hum.

Universitas Bangka Belitung

Email: arie622@gmail.com

Andri Fernanda, M.A.

Universitas Bangka Belitung

Email: andrifermanda92@gmail.com

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis karakteristik realisme magis dan kaitan salah satu karakteristiknya dengan absurditas untuk mencapai penerimaan atas penyesalan. Objek yang digunakan ialah novel yang berjudul *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe* oleh Toshikazu Kawaguchi. Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk melihat bagaimana hal magis ada dan memengaruhi seseorang menuju penerimaan atas permasalahan yang ada. Metode yang digunakan ialah deskriptif kualitatif dengan teori milik Wendy B. Faris untuk realisme magis dan konsep milik Albert Camus untuk absurditas. Pada objek ditemukan keseluruhan karakteristik realisme magis sebanyak 181 data, yang terdiri dari 64 *Irreducible Element*, 4 *Phenomenal World*, 11 *Unsettling Doubts*, 43 *Merging Realms*, dan 59 *Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity*. Pada absurditas juga ditemukan melalui karakteristik *Irreducible Element* sebagai jembatan menuju penerimaan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa novel *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe* oleh Toshikazu Kawaguchi memenuhi karakteristik realisme magis menurut Wendy B. Faris dan berkaitan dengan absurditas menuju penerimaan atas penyesalan menurut konsep Albert Camus.

Kata kunci: Absurditas, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe*, Karakteristik, Realisme Magis

Abstract

*This research analyzes the characteristics of magical realism and its connection to absurdity in order to achieve acceptance of regret. The object used is the novel titled *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi. This research was conducted to see how magic exists and influences a person toward accepting existing problems. The method used is descriptive qualitative, with Wendy B. Faris's theory for magical realism and Albert Camus's concept for absurdity. In the object, a total of 181 characteristics of magical realism were found, consisting of 64 Irreducible Elements, 4 Phenomenal Worlds, 11 Unsettling Doubts, 43 Merging Realms, and 59 Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity. Absurdity was also found thru the characteristic of Irreducible Elements as a bridge to acceptance. This study concludes that the novel *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi meets the characteristics of magical realism according to Wendy B. Faris and relates to absurdity leading to acceptance of regret according to Albert Camus's concept.*

Keywords: *Absurdity, Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Café, Characteristics, Magical Realism*

INTRODUCTION

Literature, as a component of culture, is not simply meant to amuse; it also depicts human reality. Nurgiyantoro asserts that a variety of human life issues must be depicted in literary works (in Rahayu, 2022, p. 745). Consequently, because literary works still have relevance to everyday life, one will not feel alienated by their contents. Literary works offer numerous lessons through the diverse issues that are narrated. Literary works can act as a controlling instrument by directing the behavior and progress of their readers (Epa, 2019, p. 1). With so many lessons taught in literature, this is what influences how people behave in real life.

An example of a literary work that provides such learning is novel. Novels illustrate the world's reality while teaching us valuable lessons through their innovative fictitious stories. The novel contains extraordinary tales, such as the author's own experiences or imaginations (Asmida, 2020, p. 40). Compared to other literary works like short stories, novels have more intricate features. In genres, in addition to romance, other genres that are being told in the present wave of novel production are mystical stories.

The literary genre of magical realism emphasizes situations in which people encounter seemingly commonplace events that are inconceivable in the real world. The theory of magical realism has been developed by numerous individuals, with Wendy B. Faris being one of the most well-known. Faris claims that magical realism blends fantasy with reality, making it difficult to distinguish between the two things in everyday life (2004, p. 1). Faris explores the idea of magical realism in five characteristics in her book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, they are Irreducible Element, which is something that cannot be described by the rules of nature. Phenomenal World, indicating that fantasy can has something realistic. Unsettling Doubts, where before deciding that an element is irreducible, there are several questions. Merging Realms, when two worlds come together. Disruption of Time, Space, and Identity, when time, place, and identity collide.

In terms of its use in literature, the genre of magical realism is now produced worldwide, even in Asia, and is no longer limited to Latin America. One of those nations is Japan, where Toshikazu Kawaguchi is an author, whose book is called *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe*. According to Wendy B. Faris's definition of magical realism, this book contains every characteristic of her theory. From how the café's features might take one to the past or the future to how these magical elements upend the immediate

surroundings, including time, place, and identity. The absurdity that takes place in this book can be examined in addition to its magical realism.

In the Myth of Sisyphus section of his book *The Myth of Sisyphus & Other Essays*, Albert Camus describes how Sisyphus persistently pushes a big rock to the summit while knowing it will roll back down (1955, p. 72). Both Sisyphus and the characters in the novel want to pursue something even though they know there won't be any change—just acceptance or happiness—which is consistent with the story in the novel *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe*. The characters' path to that acceptance is aided by the magical realism factor in this instance.

There aren't any studies found that use the novel as a subject of study, particularly when applying Faris's theory of magical realism. The reasoning behind selecting this novel is the novel's intricacy, which prompts an examination of the story's components that illustrate elements of magical realism and the folly of human wants in light of the outside world. The theory and concept are employed since they have never been utilized before and to illustrate modern life, in which individuals frequently experience regret for their past and attempt to make changes, but sometimes things don't work out the way we had hoped, therefore we must learn to accept things as they are.

RESEARCH METHOD

Type of the Research

A qualitative descriptive method was chosen for use in this study. Generally speaking, qualitative research is centered on an understanding of a phenomenon and uses non-numerical approaches, such writing, to collect data. According to Creswell, the new qualitative research is employed by qualitative researchers to gather data in natural settings that are sensitive to the subjects and places under study. The data is then analyzed both inductively and deductively before themes or patterns are established (2013, p. 44). Because it can adjust to the current circumstances, this kind of research has greater application flexibility. Furthermore, the information gathered is derived from and considers the social and cultural elements of the immediate surroundings. Sandelowski also stated that the researcher will explain their choice in the description, whether it be a descriptive overview of observations or interview data (2000, pp. 335–336). The findings are still predicated on the researcher's viewpoint of the topics they wish to cover in their study, regardless of how the data is gathered.

This study also falls under literary criticism since it examines the absurdity and magical realism elements in Toshikazu Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe*. The whole purpose of criticism is to describe and assess a specific literary work (Daiches, 1956, p. 240). In line with the purpose of literary criticism, data will be gathered for this study and thereafter explained and concluded.

Object of the Research

The novel *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi was chosen as the object of this research. The data was collected based on the words, sentences, and dialogs found within the novel. This novel, originally written in Japanese, was translated by Geoffrey Trousselot and released on September 17, 2020, by Picador. It is the second novel in Kawaguchi's series, following the successful prequel that transitioned from play to novel. It tells the story of a cafe that can transport its visitors to any time they want, with numerous rules they must follow in order to meet the people they wish to meet and resolve their problems. This is done because the problem is very disruptive to their lives, so even though nothing can be changed, they still do it to at least achieve some happiness.

Data Collection

Document analysis was used as a data collection method in this research. A methodical approach to document analysis is the evaluation or examination of both written and electronic documents (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe* novel by Toshikazu Kawaguchi was used as the object of this research, which is why this novel is classified as a primary data source. Then, the book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* by Wendy B. Faris was used as the main theory, and the book *The Myth of Sisyphus & Other Essays* by Albert Camus, specifically the section The Myth of Sisyphus, was used as supporting theory in this research. These two books were then classified as secondary data sources. Data collection was carried out in 3 stages as described by Bowen: skimming (superficial examination), which involves a brief scanning of the documents to be analyzed; reading (thorough examination), where objects and theories are read comprehensively; and finally, interpretation, where the data found is interpreted in relation to general theories.

Data Analysis

The data found in the novel was then analyzed using Wendy B. Faris's theory of magical realism and Albert Camus's concept of absurdity. After the characteristics of magical realism were identified, the next step was to analyze the absurdity present in the story through one of the characteristics of magical realism. In their book, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (1994), Miles & Huberman divide data analysis into 3 stages: data reduction, which is the process of selecting and focusing data based on the theories and concepts used; data display, which involves organizing data based on its characteristics; and conclusion drawing and verification, where data is interpreted based on existing problems and conclusions are drawn.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Characteristics of Magical Realism

1. Irreducible Element

Datum 1

“You know that even if you **return to the past, reality won't change**, right?” (Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 13).

The datum above occurred when Gohtaro, the first character to travel back in time, was being explained the rules of the cafe if someone wanted to time travel by Kazu, the café's waiter. Despite this, Gohtaro still chose to go.

There are many rules that must be followed if someone wants to travel through time, this is one of them. In line with the concept of the *Irreducible Element*, where cause-and-effect logic is disrupted here. On the datum, as is generally known, if someone does something, there will be a result obtained. However, unlike this journey through time, nothing will change even if they go back to the past or into the future. However, something changed emotionally: they were able to express what they couldn't express before. This falls under the category of *Irreducible Element* in magical realism.

2. Phenomenal World

Datum 2

‘**The cafe was a few minutes' walk from Jimbocho Station in central Tokyo.** Located on a narrow back street in an area of mostly office buildings, it displayed a small sign bearing its name, ‘Funiculi Funicula’. The cafe was at basement level, so without this sign, people would walk by without noticing it.’ (Kawaguchi, 2020, pp. 1–2).

The datum above describes the location of the Funiculi Funicula café, which is located in a real country in the world, specifically in Tokyo, Japan. The cafe is located not

far from Jimbocho Station, which is a station in the Chiyoda area that has been in operation since 1972.

This aligns with the concept of the *Phenomenal World*, where there is a reality in magical realism that is free from the depiction of true reality. The real element in this story is Jimbocho Station, and there's something magical in it, which is a cafe that can transport someone to the time they want around that reality. This data falls under the characteristic of *Phenomenal World* in magical realism.

3. Unsettling Doubts

Datum 3

‘Still muttering to himself, he shook his head, **swung round and began walking back up the stairs**. But then he suddenly stopped with a thoughtful expression on his face. **He went back and forth for a while, climbing the stairs and descending them.**’ (Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 2).

The datum above happened when Gohtaro had just arrived at Funiculi Funicula. When he arrived, he didn't go straight inside but stood frozen in front of the café, wondering if it was really the café that could transport someone to the desired time, as his friend had described. There was doubt within him before he actually traveled through time.

In line with the characteristics of *Unsettling Doubts*, where the reader experiences doubt before determining something to be an irreducible element, here it is the character himself who experiences this. Nevertheless, what is the character felt can also be felt by the reader. This is because there are elements in the story that also occur in the real world. Therefore, this data falls under *Unsettling Doubts*.

4. Merging Realms

Datum 4

‘Although Shuichi had told Gohtaro about the rumour surrounding this cafe, he never expected to find himself **face to face with someone from the future.**’ (Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 42).

The datum above occurred when Gohtaro had already met Shuichi in the past. The age difference between them was 22 years, which surprised Shuichi, even though he knew about the café's magic, as they were previously the same age. He didn't expect to experience it himself.

Merging Realms is a place where two worlds meet, and ghosts are a part of life. Some are alive and some are dead here. Just like in the datum, there are characters who are already dead and still alive in the present, but they interact as if both were still alive. With the meeting of two different worlds, this data falls under *Merging Realms*.

5. Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity

Datum 5

‘He was no good with scary rides - the mere sight of them was enough to make him swoon - but unfortunately for him, **his surroundings seemed to be going past him faster and faster, as time wound back twenty-two years.**

He felt increasingly giddy. When he realized that **he was now returning to the past**, his consciousness gradually receded.’ (Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 33).

The datum above shows when Gohtaro performed the ritual to go back in time. As the ritual began, what he felt around him became faster and more sudden, and he was already back in the past.

What happened to Gohtaro aligns with the characteristics of *Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity*, where he initially existed in the present but time-traveled to the past. This means time is disrupted here because someone can move through time. What Gohtaro experienced falls under *Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity*.

B. Element of Magical Realism That Relates to Absurdity in Dealing with Regret and Acceptance

Based on the analyzed characteristics of magical realism, the concept of absurdity can be found through the characteristic of the *Irreducible Element*. This is because when trying to resolve regret toward acceptance, the process of time travel is needed, which can be found through the characteristic of the *Irreducible Element*.

1. The Magic Chair

“The third rule: there is **only one seat that allows you to go back in time. But another customer is sitting on it. The only time you can sit there is when the customer goes to the toilet. That customer always goes once a day, but no one can predict when that will be.**” (Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 10).

If someone wants to travel through time at the Funiculi Funicula café, there are many rules they must follow. Sitting in a specific chair in the café where there is a ghost who sits there is one of the rules. To reach their problem’s resolution, each character does this: they sit in a specific chair where a ghost is sitting on top of it and must wait for the ghost to leave in order to time travel. Based on Camus’ concept of absurdity, each character is serving a punishment, which is going to the past or future to solve their problems, just like Sisyphus who had to push a boulder up a hill for his mistakes.

2. Coffee Pourer

“When a pourer becomes pregnant with a girl, the pourer’s power is transferred to the baby...”

Kiyoshi’s eyes opened in surprise.

‘Is it right that **your daughter will be able to pour coffee to return people to the past when she turns seven?**’

‘Yes. **That’s right!** You’re quite well informed, aren’t you?’ (Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 173).

To go back in time, someone needs to pour coffee to perform the ritual. Not just anyone can perform this ritual; there are certain requirements that must be met, such as being female, starting from the age of 7, and not being pregnant with a daughter. All the characters in the story have their coffee poured by the same person, Kazu Tokita, who meets the criteria. The difference lies in Kurata who is going to the future, with no explanation of who poured it, but it’s clear that person met the requirements, and Kiyoshi being poured by Miki, the child of Nagare Tokita, because Kazu could no longer do it. The similarity to what happened to Sisyphus is that there was something they had to face before reaching that acceptance. Sisyphus had to push a boulder to achieve happiness.

3. The Reaction

“The man behind the counter **stood casually** grinding beans, **unfazed by Yukio’s appearance**. Even **though Yukio was a stranger to him**, and he had **suddenly appeared in this chair**, he seemed to be acting **as if it was all perfectly normal**. He **didn’t even show any interest** in talking to him, which suited Yukio fine.” (Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 98).

In magical realism, something strange in the real world is considered ordinary. This is because they are already used to it, so they don’t show any comment. All the characters in the story travel through time, but not a single person in the café shows any surprise. The only difference is with Kiyoshi; when he arrived, Kaname’s husband was surprised by his presence. This is because he is not often at that café, so it’s something new for him. Associated with Camus’s absurdity, Sisyphus also receives no reaction from the gods. They only believe that the punishment given will only make Sisyphus suffer even more. In fact, he was actually happy.

4. Coffee Temperature

“The **time you have in the past** will only be **from when I pour you the coffee until the coffee has gone cold.**” (Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 29).

The temperature of the coffee here is identified as something that cannot be explained by natural laws. This is because the temperature of the coffee can determine how long someone can travel through time without any technological assistance, and that time starts from when the coffee is poured until just before it cools down. All the characters do it,

making the most of the time they have, which is unknown how long it will be because each person has a different duration. Initially, only Yukio planned not to finish his coffee because he wanted to be just like his mother. However, his mother changed his mind, so he decided to finish the coffee and return to the present. Based on Camus' absurdity, the temperature of the coffee is like the time it takes to reach the top of the hill. Even though he is done it repeatedly, he is still happy because there is something he learned from it. Similarly, the characters made the most of the time they had and were brave enough to make those decisions to be happy.

5. The Absent of Change

“You know that even if you **return to the past, reality won't change**, right?”
(Kawaguchi, 2020, p. 13).

The most frequently mentioned rule is that even if someone travels through time, nothing can be changed. In line with the characteristics of the *Irreducible Element*, where the cause-and-effect logic is disrupted, nothing can change here. Only emotionally can change. Nevertheless, there are still people who continue to do it to gain acceptance. Each character meets the person who is the source of their regret, hoping that everything will become clear. In the end, they didn't change things drastically, but at least they accepted what happened and became happy. It was in this process that acceptance occurred. Sisyphus accepted what happened to him as his own fault and became happy. There was something he learned from that punishment. Every character in the story is also happy in the end.

The idea of absurdity, which is taken directly from the Sisyphus narrative, really serves to highlight the uncertainty of human existence. Although the world is unable to satisfy human desires, people nonetheless look for meaning in it. As was the case with Sisyphus, one must remain happy despite having faced many challenges. Nothing is in vain since there is always something to learn from an event. Accepting the absurdities of life is a basis for accepting life as it is, not a reason to reject it.

The characters in *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe* are similar in that they attempt to change things and fix mistakes by traveling back in time, but the world is unable to grant their wishes. Even if they go back in time or into the future, they will be powerless to alter it. Nevertheless, they continue to do it in the hopes of finding happiness later. Because everything must be accepted regardless of its futility.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

This research discusses the characteristics of magical realism and the connection of one of its characteristics to absurdity in order to achieve acceptance of the regrets that occur in life in the novel *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi. This novel, which tells about problems in life, falls under the literary work of magical realism based on Wendy B. Faris's theory in her book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, where 181 data points were found, consisting of 64 *Irreducible Elements*, 4 *Phenomenal Worlds*, 11 *Unsettling Doubts*, 43 *Merging Realms*, and 59 *Disruptions of Time, Space, and Identity*.

Based on the characteristics that have been found and analyzed, the *Irreducible Element* characteristic is used as a bridge toward accepting the absurdity of life, based on the concept put forward by Albert Camus in the book *The Myth of Sisyphus & Other Essays*, specifically in the section The Myth of Sisyphus. This is because to achieve this acceptance, the characters must travel through time, a process that is present in the *Irreducible Element* characteristic. Overall, Kawaguchi successfully represents magical realism in his work and provides a meaningful lesson about the absurdity of life, where we must accept it and be happy.

Suggestions

Based on the research findings, the following suggestions can be offered to future researchers: This study can be used as a reference for future research that discusses magical realism theory, the concept of absurdity, or the object of *Before the Coffee Gets Cold: Tales from the Cafe* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi. For the object itself, other theories can be applied, such as existentialism, to analyze the characters' responsibility for their choices. For readers, this research can be used as a learning tool to expand knowledge related to magical realism and absurdity. Not only that, but the object can also be used as a lesson about the absurdities of life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dhea Sekar Arum was born in Pangkalpinang, April 8, 2003. She is an undergraduate student in Department of English Literature, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Bangka Belitung. Her Email is dheasekar.a@gmail.com and her Instagram is dheasekar_. She can also be found in LinkedIn, Dhea Sekar Arum.

REFERENCES

- Asmida, E. (2020). Magical realism in Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*. *Eralingua: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Asing Dan Sastra*, 4(1), 39–53. <https://doi.org/10.26858/eralingua.v4i1.11891>
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Camus, A. (1955). *The myth of Sisyphus & other essays*. Vintage Books.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Daiches, D. (1956). *Critical approaches to literature*. Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd.
- Epa, S. (2019). An analysis the main characters in the novel "The Lost Boy" by Dave Pelzer". *Linguistic Journal*, 7(1), 1–7. <https://unpi.ac.id/ejournal/index.php/linguistic/article/view/13>
- Faris, W. B. (2004). *Ordinary enchantments: Magical realism and the remystification of narrative*. Vanderbilt University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/complitstudies.44.4.0510>
- Kawaguchi, T. (2020). *Before the coffee gets cold: Tales from the cafe*. Picador.
- Rahayu, T. D. (2022). Psychological side in literary works and its implication on English teaching. *Griya Cendikia*, 7(2), 744–760. <https://doi.org/10.47637/griya-cendikia.v7i2.370>
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334–340. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X\(200008\)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G](https://doi.org/10.1002/1098-240X(200008)23:4<334::AID-NUR9>3.0.CO;2-G)