

# Blending Magic and Reality: A Study of Jorge Luis Borges' "The Circular Ruins"

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**ABSTRACT:** *The aim of this research paper is to analyse Jorge Luis Borges' story 'The Circular Ruins' from postmodern perspective. The story reveals the idea of undefined reality and how everything ends in nothingness. Most of the part in the story consists of what happens in narrator's dreams and concept of transformation of things. Postmodern features of Magical Realism, instability and continuous change get prominence in the story. A blend of magical elements and reality is created in the text of the story to have a deeper understanding of reality. As the title of the story indicates 'The Circular Ruins', it revolves around a "circular amphitheatre". All the important incidents in the story occur in the circular ruins of a temple. Nothing is supposed to be fixed. Meaning is also not fixed in language and there is a continuous displacement of meaning in postmodern fiction. In this story, Borges baffles the readers while describing many objects. Borges has centred this story on the phenomenon of dream and infinity.*

**Key Words:** *Dream, circle, zero, magic, reality, illusion, immortality and imagination.*

"The Circular Ruins" ("Las Ruinas Circulares"), a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, was published in magazine *The Sur* in 1940. It is included in his book *The Garden of Forking Paths* published in 1941. Later, it was published in the first part of *Fictions (Ficciones)* in 1944. It was translated in English by Anthony Bonner in 1949. "The Circular Ruins" is remarkable for the use of imagination and fantasy, particularly by means of magical realism. Bonner's translation of the story is used in the present work for analysis.

It begins with an epigraph, "And if he left off dreaming about you..." (52). The story is about a "grey man" who visits a ruined temple in order to create a son, a living being, while dreaming. After a long struggle he succeeds in creating a young man, his son who is nothing more than a dreamed phantom. The story explores the idea of undefined reality and how everything ends in nothingness. As RadhamaniSarma comments, "...[T]he author weaves a dream story around the ruined settings of a temple, leading him on to a belief of void and nothingness."

The old man, also referred to as a stranger and wizard, reaches the bank of a river after leaving his home in the South. He comes from a village "where the Zend language has not been contaminated by Greek and where leprosy is frequent" (52). He comes to the centre of a temple ruined by ancient fires and stays there in order to create a human being with his magical powers. He crawls to the centre of the round temple in order to make his dwelling. He falls asleep, and finds himself without his injuries in the morning which he had got while coming out of the muddy river water. He shows no signs of surprise to find his injuries gone. In order to execute his desire, he goes to sleep again in the same temple which, he thinks, is the appropriate place for dreaming. Sounds of birds and human beings have forced him to shift to an area where nobody would be able to find him. As he is unable to answer any questions about his background and purpose, this temple is the best location he can find for his purpose. People of the area provide him with basic necessities.

Soon his chaotic dreams turn into dialectical ones. He dreams himself in the centre of a circular amphitheater which seems to be like the same temple where he is dwelling for the realization of his aim. He imagines a number of students, some near and some far, with clear visible features. He lectures on "anatomy, cosmography and magic" to them and they listen carefully in order to enter into the real world through his dream. The dreamer tries to discover who among the pupils is worthy of becoming real as "[h]e [is] seeking a soul worthy of participating in the universe" (53).

The pupils who dare to challenge him remain there instead of those who accept his ideas passively. One day while sleeping in the afternoon, he chooses one of them and banishes the rest. The one who is left is "a taciturn, sallow boy, at times intractable, and whose sharp features resembled those of his dreamer" (54). He turns out to be a brilliant student who even astonishes his teacher with his intelligence.

The dreamer suffers from sudden insomnia that creates an obstacle to his purpose. He feels unsuccessful in his task of uniting the student's body, which makes him cry in anger. He feels unable to sleep and dream and, as a result unable to return to his son (student). He spends a month "recovering his

strength" (54) and prepares himself to go back to sleep. He waits until the day of the perfect moon and in the afternoon bathes himself in the water, worships the planetary gods and goes to sleep. Instantly he dreams of something warm, something like a tight fist of red colour without any face or sex. Consecutively fourteen nights he dreams of this heart while only watching it and correcting it, but he feels happy when he touches it for the first time on the fourteenth night of his dreaming. Then he lets one night pass without dreaming and the next night he resumes with the vision of other essential organs of the human being. It takes another year to create the skeleton and the eyelids. Most time-consuming it is to imagine the innumerable hair on the head. By now the pupil has become a sleeping man whom the dreamer dreams every night.

The wizard wants to turn his imagination into reality but night after night, seeing the young man asleep, he feels depressed. He can barely restrain from destroying him and begs to the earthly gods. Thereafter he throws himself before a statue, uncertain whether it is a "tiger or a colt". The same night god of Fire comes in his dream and tells him that he has the magical power to awaken his dreamed student. The god of Fire orders him to teach his creation all the rites in order to prepare him to reside in another ruined temple. The dreamer is also told that his creation will be so real that except for both of them nobody would come to know that he is a phantom. Soon after "[i]n the dream of the man that dreamed, the dreamed one awoke" (56). According to the god's instructions, he spends two years to give his creation the required knowledge such as the "mysteries of the universe and the cult of fire". The dreamer is scared of the idea that he would have to part with his son, his creation; so he increases his dreaming hours. He intends to spend most of his time with his son and takes pleasure in the thought that his son's existence depends only on his sleep, his dreaming.

The wizard initiates his son to reality when he instructs him to put a flag on a high hill. He understands that his son is ready to be born when the next morning he sees the flag on the peak. He kisses his son for the first, and perhaps the last, time and sends him to another temple. He does not want his son to know about the reality of his existence and his birth, so he destroys his son's memories. Now he feels purposeless and bored, but happy also because he has no aim now. After a long span of time, as the narrator says, which could be in years or in decades, two oarsmen tell him about a man in a temple of the North who walks on fire without burning himself. He recalls the words of the god of Fire that nobody would come to know about his son's reality. The thought that the firewalker is his son troubles him and he is scared that it would be humiliating for his son if he came to know that he is not normal but a mere simulacrum.

In the climax of the story, history repeats itself. One early morning, the wizard sees a similar fire touching the walls of the temple. First he thinks of saving his life but then he lets the fire come to kill him. But the fire caresses him instead of consuming him. He comes to know that he himself is also like his dreamed son, and not a real being. He is also an illusion, part of someone's dream.

"The Circular Ruins" can be described as a magical realist text. Magical realism is a genre popular in postmodern fiction in which magical elements blend to create a realistic atmosphere that accesses a deeper understanding of reality. Magical realism contains both magical and realistic elements. The story "The Circular Ruins" begins with the dreamer's presence in a "unanimous" night and then the description of atmosphere and surroundings is given.

The beginning of the story seems to be real, not imaginary. Something unusual comes in the mind when for first time in the story the wizard awakes and shows no surprise to find his wounds healed. His determination and the obligation to sleep and dream is awkward because he hides himself for it and avoids meeting the natives there as far as possible. Dreaming is not something that can be done forcibly and intentionally.

The stranger stretched himself out beneath the pedestal. He was awakened by the sun high overhead. He was not astonished to find that his wounds had healed; he closed his pallid eyes and slept, not through weakness of flesh but through determination of will. (52)

The second paragraph shows that there is something that is not real. "The purpose which guided him was not impossible, though supernatural. He wanted to dream a man; he wanted to dream him in minute entirety and impose him on reality" (53). Though the dreamer is a wizard, his aim is not only magical but "supernatural". The dreamer comes before us as a real being, yet he is unable to answer about his background or tell anything else, like his name and former life. He regulates his dreams, the beings in his dreams, creates them, and destroys them. The purpose of his dreaming is to create a man, a son of his own. Moreover, he wants his dream to turn into reality.

Most of the part in the story consists of what happens in his dreams. He directs his dreams according to his will. He creates all the organs of the body while dreaming. The god of Fire makes it possible to transform this phantom into a real being. All this cannot be done in reality, but the description of fire and

of two oarsmen who wake up the wizard is real. He gets worried after listening about a man who can walk on fire without burning himself. Then the picture of cloud, of leopard's gums, that seems real; all is taken away when the wizard fails to burn himself in those flames which arise from the same ruined temple. He comes to know that he is not a real being, but an illusion like his son.

In 1977, Borges delivered lectures on seven different topics in Buenos Aires. Buddhism was one among those topics, which fascinated him. His story, "The Circular Ruins" uses some of his ideas about Buddhism. He says, "Buddhism does not admit the reality of the body or of the soul" (Weinberger 59). He tells the story of Buddha, originally named Siddhartha or Gautama, who becomes the "Awakened One", and gets "Nirwana" by sitting under a pipal tree in Benares. Borges says, "Gautama became the Buddha, the Enlightened or Awakened One as opposed to the rest of us who are sleeping or are dreaming this great dream that is life" (Weinberger 59-60). According to Borges, our life is a dream as we all are dreaming it, or it is possible that somebody else is dreaming our life. At the end of the story "The Circular Ruins", the wizard comes to feel that someone else was dreaming his life. He dreams about his son and succeeds in changing him into a real being. Yet he himself is not real, but an illusion dreamt by somebody else.

Borges speaks directly to the imagination of the reader (Beaudin 57). He takes us into the dreams of the wizard, and makes us feel as wizard does. While reading the story, the feeling of perplexity dominates the reader's mind. It is difficult to distinguish in the story where reality ends and dream begins. The story presents a blurred mixture of reality and dreams, fact and fiction. By doing so, Borges forces his readers to adopt a skeptical behavior towards his writings, which he considers to be a basic quality for the act of good reading.

Another feature of Borges's story writing, which fills the reader's mind with questions, is his "denial of time". This feature is very prominent in "The Circular Ruins" also. He shares this quality with Scheherazade of *Thousand and One Nights*. Borges takes his reader into a timeless state, keeping no distinction between fact and fiction as in this story. In one of his essays entitled "The New Refutation of Time," Borges tries to explain his attitude towards time, saying, "I deny time." Another essay titled "The Partial Magic of the Quixote" depicts the same stance in the context of time. Borges writes while enjoying the privilege of having freedom from the boundaries of time. He does not write chronologically; he writes without paying attention to the distinctions of past and present, dream and reality. The ideas presented in both of these essays are evident in the story "The Circular Ruins". He intends the reader to move into an imaginary world perceived by him.

It seems that both the essays are related to the "theory of relativity" propounded by Albert Einstein. According to Einstein, time is not uniform and absolute. The idea that time travels is based on the theory of "special relativity". According to "special" and "general" relativity theory, one can travel into the past and future because of particular types of motion in space. Some researchers from California and Moscow, by referring to Einstein's theory of relativity, have declared, "There is nothing in the laws of physics to prevent time travel. It may be extremely difficult to put into practice, but it is not impossible" (Gribbin). The influence of the idea of time travel is visible in Borges's writings.

As the title suggests, the story "The Circular Ruins" revolves around a "circular amphitheater". All the important incidents in the story occur in the circular ruins of a temple. A circle's chief feature is that it has no beginning and no end, and it is infinite. The word 'infinite' fascinates Borges, which is sort of a synonym of the word 'circle' or 'circular'. Circle also represents '0', a digit of mathematics that also represents infinity. '0' means nothing but it includes everything. Most of Borges's stories are centred on this phenomenon of infinity.

Borges was influenced by the title of that collection of tales told by Scheherazade, entitled *Thousand and One Nights*. He believes that with Scheherazade retelling the same story that opened the *Thousand and One Nights*, the whole compendium of tales becomes circular and thus infinite (Beaudin 55). In a lecture given in Buenos Aires in 1977 on the *Thousand and One Nights*, Borges compares the title to the English expression "forever and a day" and says:

Why were there first a thousand and later a thousand and one? I think there are two reasons. First, there was the superstition – and superstition is very important in this case – that even numbers are evil omens. They then sought an odd number and luckily added 'and one'. If they had made it nine hundred and ninety-nine we would have felt that there was a night missing. This way we feel that we have been given something infinite, that we have received a bonus, another night. (Weinberger 49-50)

"The Circular Ruins" is even more remarkable because of Borges's amazing use of language and choice of words. His language creates a magical effect upon his readers. Let us have a look at the opening sentence of the story: "No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night..." (52). The use of the adjective "unanimous"

before the word night is something utterly strange. An ordinary reading cannot grasp the use of such odd adjectives immediately, yet they make the writing interesting. There are many other examples of such adjective and adverbs in the story. The description of the temple and the trees also bewilders the reader: "... he knew that the incessant trees had not succeeded in strangling the ruins of another propitious temple..." (52). The adjective "incessant" preceding the word "trees" and thereafter the use of the word "unfamiliar" with leaves, baffles the reader.

Similarly, many other unusual adjectives and adverbs and astonishing metaphors are sprinkled throughout this story. At the end of the story the description of the environment makes this clear:

First (after a long drought) a remote cloud, as light as a bird, appeared on a hill; then, toward the South, the sky took on the rose color of leopards gum; then came clouds of smoke which rusted the metal of the nights; afterwards came the panic-stricken flight of wild animals. (57)

Borges's use of playful language in his writings provides us with such descriptions that seem unimaginable. When he talks about the pupils, he writes:

The stranger dreamed that he was in the centre of a circular amphitheater which was more or less the burnt temple; clouds of taciturn students filled the tiers of seats; the faces of the farthest ones hung at a distance of many centuries and as high as the stars, but their features are completely precise. (53)

Students' faces were so far as to be at a "distance of many centuries" and as high "as the stars": these phrases are rather unusual to describe the remoteness of any object. But the paradox here is that in spite of so much distance their features are visible and clear.

Another feature of Borges's writing style is his "unemphatic style". He writes while showing his disinterestedness, yet his few simple words succeed in creating an effective sentence. In the story, when the wizard awakes: "He examined his wounds and saw, without astonishment, that they had healed". Thus very concisely using the phrase "without astonishment", he takes the reader into an experience of the magical realist qualities of his fiction.

Instability and continuous change are two things that postmodernism emphasizes. Nothing is supposed to be fixed. Meaning is also not fixed in language; there is a continuous displacement of meaning in postmodernism fiction. While reading a postmodern work, we sometimes fail to perceive any particular image of the object. Borges baffles the readers when he describes the appearance of the statue, "... circular enclosure crowned with a stone tiger or horse, which sometimes was the color of flame and now that of ashes" (52). The wizard fails to provide life to his created phantom and pleads to a statue: "... he threw himself at the feet of the effigy which was perhaps a tiger or perhaps a colt and implored its unknown help" (55). Further Borges writes: "It was an atrocious bastard of a tiger and a colt, but at the same time these two fiery creatures and also a bull, a rose and a storm" (55). After reading this, nothing clear comes before our eyes. We feel unable to imagine any obvious image of the statue. This exhibits a typical Borgesian way of writing.

The title of the story "The Circular Ruins" is appropriate according to the setting and happenings in the story. It not only refers to story's setting but verifies the "recurrent theme of destruction, change and evolution" (Sarma).

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