



## Magic (AI) Realism as Postcolonial Device in Toni Morrison 'S "Beloved"

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### ABSTRACT

*Magical realism as a dominant literary device in Toni Morrison's Beloved can be considered as a decolonizing agent in a postcolonial context. Morrison's narrative in Beloved takes the advantage of both realism and magic to challenge the assumptions of an authoritative colonialist attitude and so can be alleged as a powerful and efficient method to project the postcolonial experience of African-American ex-slaves in the United States. It can also provide an alternate point of view to Eurocentric accounts of reality and history to attacks the solidity of Eurocentric definitions and as a consequence to portray the hidden and silenced voices of numerous enslaved generations of African-American in the history of United States. The present study attempts to explore magical realism's decolonizing role in Morrison's Beloved. In pursuing this goal it will trace the narrative and thematic strategies of magical realism that highlight the novel as an essential text of postcolonial literature.*

**Keywords : GHOSTS, ABIKU, POSTCOLONIAL, AFRO-AMERICAN, EMPIRICISM**

Through the recent years, magical realism has become a popular term which refers to a particular narrative mode that provides a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality to that of Western philosophy, expressed in many postcolonial and non-Western works of contemporary fiction. The popularity of magical realist fiction in English in postcolonial nations has promoted a debate on the suitability of magical realism as a postcolonial strategy of writing. Stephen Selmon in his influential article "Magic Realism as post-colonial Discourses" calls on a mixture of postmodernist assumptions to claim that magical realism is able to express a number of postcolonial elements. He draws attention to the production of binarism and dualities operating in settler cultures that foreground the "gaps, absences and silences produced by the colonial encounter". Selmon claims that magical realism's strength is in that it encodes "a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing system". He inserts that, "magical realism, at least in a literary context, seems most visibly operative in cultures situated at the fringes mainstream literary traditions". Selmon explains that there are two discourses in their magical realist narrative that each of them has a different perspective: the magical and the real. To, this structure reflects the tension between the ever present and ever proposed colonized and colonialist discourse into postcolonial contest in which the narrative structure reflects the relations of the culture in which they are set.

A large number of writers, who are currently in conditions of oppression in the United States, have taken up magical realism as a means to write against the dominant American culture. Among them is Toni Morrison, an African American writer, whose fifth novel, *Beloved*, has been described as one of the most prominent texts to emerge out of the African-American literary tradition. She is concerned with the concept of blacks as marginalized and black literature as the non-canonical literature and tries to redefine white/black hierarchy of mainstream discourse, a discourse which always has undermined black's existence in the construction of American literature and culture. In playing in the *Dark Morrison* claims that:

There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among

literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the over whelming presence on black people on the United States. This agreement is made about a population that preceded every American writer of renown and was, I have come to believe, one of the most furtively radical impinging forces on the country's literature. The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understand of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.

*Beloved* is written from the marginal point of view of African-American who does not have social and political power. It is the story of Seth, an ex-slave, who grieves the fact that she murdered her baby girl in order to save her from a life of slavery. She mourns so much that her grief becomes manifest into a body of a young woman named *Beloved*, a ghost in the beginning, the same age that Seth's death baby would have been had she lived. The presence of two opposing discursive systems of magic and real in *beloved* can reflect the tensions between the colonized and colonizer discoursed in a post-colonial context. Applying postcolonial terminology, realism represents the hegemonic discourse of the colonizer while magic refers to the strategy of opposition and resistance used by colonized. Magical realism can also provide a way to fill in the gaps of cultural representation in a postcolonial context by recovering the fragments and voices of forgotten histories from the point of view of the colonized. In other words, magical realism may serve as the transformative decolonizing project of imaging alternative histories. The magical realism of Morrison's text by addressing historical issues critically and in so doing attempting to heal historical wounds, not only can reflect history, it may also seek to change it. Thus, *beloved* can be read as a postcolonial historiography intervention, a strategic re-centering of American history in the lives of African-American who are historically dispossessed.

The binary logic of imperialism is establishing a relation of dominance in the imperial world through seeing the world in terms of binary oppositions. The dominant values of Western

culture privilege formal realism, the logical and ordinary rather than the mysterious and fantastic. This Western discourse defines a European center through the textual creation of non-European other and relies upon scientific and social terms to describe societies in a manner that supports the ideology that the European view is universal. In one considers magical realism from the place of other and knows that magical realism introduces non-logical and non-scientific accounts from things, it would be clear to see that the transgressive power of magical realism provides a means to attack the assumptions of the dominant culture and logical truth. Hence magical realism forms a new decolonized space of narrative which is not already taken by the assumptions and techniques of European realism. Wendy B. Faris has coined the term "devo-folizations" and has argued that "the devocalized narrative and bridging techniques of magical realism challenge the colonial authority of European realism by disengaging from the empirical basis on which that authority seems to be built"

In magical realism, the focalization-the perspective from which events are presented is indeterminate; the kinds of perceptions in presents are indefinable and the origins' of those perceptions are unelectable. That indeterminacy results from the fact that magical realism includes two conflicting kinds of perception that perceive two different kinds of event: magical events and images not normally reported to the reader of realistic fiction because they are not empirically verifiable (if not always ordinary) ones that are realism's characteristic domain. Thus magical realism modifies the conventions of realism based in empirical evidence, incorporating other kinds of perception. In other words, the narrative is "devocalized" because it seems to come from two radically different perspectives at once.

The devocalized narrative structure in *Beloved* challenges the authority of European realism and its dominance and as a result can be considered as a powerful decolonizing agent. The subversive power of magical realism originates from "juxtaposition of objective and subjective realities in ways that call the objective into question, allowing authors to challenge official readings of social, political, and historical events" (Hawley 283). The source of this transgressive and subversive aspect of magical realist narrative in *Beloved* lies in the face that, once the reader finds that the category of the real is not define then all assumptions of truth becomes vague. Because the setting of *Beloved* is realistic, when the category of the real is questioned within the fiction, the world outside the fiction is made less certain as well. In *Beloved* there is no distinction between the spirit world and the material world, between the living and the dead, between past present and future. The family accepts the presence of a child ghost who later takes human form, as the grown-up version of the child who was kicked by Seth eighteen years earlier. Ghosts thrive in magical realist fiction and are central to definitions of magical realism as a literary mode. According to Fairs, the cultural rebirth in a colonized society emerges after an encounter with death:

In this context, the fact that the cultural pasts and beliefs present in magical realism often include encounters with the dead takes an additional significance. In a process analogous to initiation rites that enact ritual experience of symbolic death and rebirth, readers and their societies strengthen themselves through narratives that bridge the worlds of living and eclipsed or dying cultures. Thus colonized societies may undergo an experience that approximates a kind of symbolic death and reconstruction of their cultural bodies through these narratives, which rediscover and affirm extinct or vanishing indigenous beliefs in the face of colonial ones

Since "ghosts make absence present", Lois Parkinson Zamora states, "they foreground magical realism's most basic concern the nature and limits of the knowable and they facilitate magical realism's critique of modernity". As said by Zamora, they "embody the fundamental magical realist sense that reality always exceeds our capacities to describe or understand or prove and that the function of literature is to engage this

excessive reality, to honor that which we may grasp intuitively but never fully or finally define". The presence of *Beloved* as a ghost is oppositional in Morrison's novel because in bothers "the scientific and materialist assumptions of Western modernity: that reality is knowable, predictable, and controllable". Moreover, *Beloved* in her return as a ghost makes the absence of past slavery, present again. By bringing this ghost, Morrison tackles the bloody heritage of slavery. She clearly links *Beloved* to the "sixty Million and more" by joining her spirit to the body of a woman who died on one of the slave ships in the Middle Passage. In a monologue *Beloved* gives an account of slave ship experience:

I am always crouching the man on my face is dead...in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men that is when I begin to be on the back of the man for a long time I see only his neck and his wide shoulders above me...he locks his eyes and dies on my face...the others do not know that he is dead. (*Beloved*)

When Denver asks her about the place she is coming from, she says that she was in a "Dark" place: "Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in ... a lot of people is down there. Some is dead". This description can be connected to that of a typical slave ship during the Middle passage. On the slave ships, people were stuffed between decks in darks in dark, stooped spaces too low for standing. The heat of these horrid place was so great and the smell so offensive that it was impossible to breath. Conditions on the slave ships were so wretched. Men, women and children crammed into every available space, denied adequate room, food of breathing space. They were not given enough water to drink and when "some water was brought: it was then that the extent of their sufferings was exposed in a fearful manner. They all rushed like maniacs towards it. No entreaties or threats or blows could restrain them; they shrieked and struggled and fought with one another for a drop of this precious liquid, as if they grew rabid at the sight of it ". When *Beloved* comes out of the water she is extremely thirsty: "she said she was thirsty ...the woman gulped water from a speckled tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it and four times the woman drank as though she had crossed a desert" (*Beloved*). In her monologue, *Beloved* assumes the guise of Seth's mother, saying that, "it is the dark face that is going to smile at me the iron circle is around my neck she does not have sharp earrings in her ears or a round basket," a description that may also suggest *Beloved's* representation of the millions of Africans killed during the passage from freedom to slavery. Morrison has brought this ancestor into realization in her novel, so that she can speak to the living about the lives of the dead.

Since one of the most important elements of magical realism is the use of legend, myth and folklore, Morrison focuses on African American oral culture to recover black historical experiences. During the period under consideration, African-American ex-slaves were perhaps the most ex-centric to the privileged centers of power. At the same time, however, they supposedly could be independent enough to utter their otherness. The use of ancestral myths for reestablishing an identity lost through slavery, gives Morrison's writing a political meaning. While the literature of African-American writers has experienced a displacement from the center and has been marginalized until its rebirth at the very end of the twentieth century, novelists like Morrison contribute to the redefinition of that marginal position, going from invisibility to visibility. At the same time they claim another kind of reality. Invisibility not only is a frequent theme in African-American narrative, it also forms an image directly related to the supernatural because it represents the invisible as opposed to the real or visible. As Rosemary Jackson points out:

Ghosts offer an alternative to the established reality, celebrating the diversity of real. Literature must be pluralist, in the

same way as society should be, as Morrison claims. This implies the gelatinization of truth and reality; there is not one single reality but several realities, nor there a single truth but several truths. On the other hand, the recurrent journeys into the past through ancestral characters and ghosts entail the breaking of a linear narrative prescribed by the Western literary cannon.

Morrison's narrative is influenced by "African American oral cultural and mythology adapted from West African culture". Black lore the myths and rituals of black culture are the most prominent elements in *Beloved*. Morrison feels a strong connection to ancestors because they were the culture holders. She applies magical realism in order to be able to use black folklore instead of authorized beliefs of Western world. Her magical character *Beloved* might have been formed after a mixture of *abiku*, *bakalu* and *orisha*, *oshun* of West African Yoruba mythology.

In West African Yoruba mythology, *abiku* is a child who returns from the dead to be born again to the same mother. The term is applied to spirits in the form of children who must repeatedly die and be reborn. According to Brenda Cooper, "[it] is the willful sprit child, who masquerades as human baby, only to recurrently 'die 'and be re-born, causing grief and mischief among the living...its issue is a commentary on the health of the human condition". *Beloved* can be considered as an *abiku* baby, who has an ambiguous existence. Morrison introduces *Beloved* into her novel, as a baby ghost who returns to the place of living.

The novel opens with the words "124 were spiteful. Full of a baby's venom". The narrator remarks that "the women of the house knew it and so did the children and that Seth's two boys left the spiteful 124, "as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake". According to Bowers "abiku babies torment their mothers by being spirits in the guide of babies, spirits who repeatedly are born, only to die and return to the spirit world". They are reportedly constantly hungry and thirsty with no stomach and are therefore obliged to eat continuously because they never know the satisfaction of feeling full. "It was as though sweet things were what she was born

for. Honey as well as the was it came in sugar sandwiches, the sludgy molasses gone hard and brutal in the can, lemonade, taffy and any type of dessert Seth brought home from restaurant"(Beloved).

As stated, by navigating the boundaries of magic and real, Morrison's text is able to claim African-American ancestral folk beliefs as a transformative power. Her devocalized narrative structure questions the validity of a set of assumptions conventionally accepted and taken for granted among literary Western historians and critics. In others words, her text overturns the assumptions of Western empiricism and questions the binary oppositions of magic and real from the viewpoint of another narrative tradition that lacks those assumptions and oppositions. She uses this to make specific political commentary on her nations' postcolonial status. By applying magical realism into dominant Western cultural form of the novel her text is able to reverse the Western indigenous binary upon which Western realism is based. According the devocalized narrative of Morrison's magical realism moves discursive power from colonizer to colonized similar to postcolonial works, and offers a fictional ground in which alternative narrative visions of agency and history can be imagined. She also revives suppressed texts of African-American writers and brings them inside the canon.

To Sum up, Postcolonial literature deals with the cultural identity of the subaltern in colonized societies and also the dilemma of developing a national identity after colonial rule. These struggles of identity, history, and future possibilities are present in magical realist work of Toni Morrison. Introducing a magical character with a narrative voice, *Beloved* distorts the traditional conception of reality according to Eurocentric definitions. Moreover, *Beloved* becomes the medium through which victims of the Middle passage gain a literate voice. In this way *Beloved* can be understood as writing back from the periphery. According, Morrison's work adds to the incomplete canon of American literature that has neglected the story of the silenced African-Americans who survived slavery. In word, beings dedicated to "sixty million and more". *Beloved* is quite successful in memorializing a vast absence the words can never fill.

## REFERENCES

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