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POST COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE OF MAGIC REALISM IN *BELOVED*

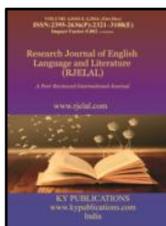
K.S.KRISHNA DUTH¹, Dr.K.BALAKRISHNAN²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham University, Kochi, Kerala, India

Email Id: krishnaduth@gmail.com

²Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts and Science, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham University, Kochi, Kerala, India

Email Id: bkbalakrishnan38@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

Magical realism as a dominant literary device can be contemplated as a decolonizing agent in a postcolonial context in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Morrison's use of narrative in *Beloved* takes the benefit of both realism and magic to challenge the assumptions of an authoritative colonist attitude and so can be alleged as a powerful and important method to exhibit the post-colonial experiences of African American ex-slaves in United States. It can also provide an alternative perspective to Eurocentric accounts of reality and history to attack the solidity of Eurocentric definitions and as a consequence to portray the silenced and unspoken voices of numerous enslaved generations of African American in the history of United States. The following study seeks to explore magical realism's decolonizing role in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It is an attempt to trace the narrative and thematic approach of magical realism that highlight the novel as an essential text of post-colonial literature.

KEY WORDS: Magic Realism, Post-Colonial, Ghost, African American, Marginalised, Abiku

This article is an attempt to analyse magic realism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in postcolonial perspective. In the recent years, the term magical realism gained popularity; it is a concept that originated in the continent, Latin America. It is closely connected to the Catholic religion, which believes in miracles. It is a literary genre in which fantastical things are treated not just as an illusion but as realistic. It is used to refer to a specific narrative mode that provides as a medium to express alternative approaches to reality to that of western philosophy, expressed in many post-colonial and non-western works of contemporary fiction. The genre magical realism is so popular in English fictions especially in post-colonial nations;

this has led to a platform of debate on the acceptability of magical realism as a postcolonial theory of writing. In the article "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse", Selmon calls on a mixture of postmodernist assumptions to claim that magical realism is able to express a number of postcolonial elements. He gives importance to the production of binarism and dualities operating in settler cultures that foreground the "gaps, absences and silences produced by the colonial encounter" (Selmon 12). 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" (16). He puts in that "magical realism, at least in a literary context, seems most visibly operative in

culture situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions" (15). He says there are two discourses in their magical realist narrative that each of them has a different perspective, the magical and the real. To this, it is the structure that reflects the stress between the ever present and the ever proposed colonized and colonist discourse into postcolonial content in which the narrative structure throw back the relations of the culture in which they are set.

A large number of writers who faced or had to undergo oppression in the United States have taken up magical realism as a tool to write against the dominant American culture. Toni Morrison is one among these writer's, she is an African American writer, whose fifth novel is *Beloved*, published in 1987. *Beloved* has been considered as one of the most notable text that emerged out of the African American literary tradition. Morrison is more concerned with the idea of blacks as marginalized and black literature as the non-canonical literature and tries to redefine white or black hierarchy of established discourse, a discourse which always has eroded the existence of black in the construction of American literature and culture. Morrison's general humanist view is 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 removal from the overwhelming presence on black people on the United States" (Morrison 5). This contract was about a population that preceded every American writer of fame and came out to be one of the most secretive radical influential focuses on the country's literature. The observation on the black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to linger at the margins of the literary imagination.

Beloved is written from the point of view of marginalized African Americans who were denied social, cultural and political power. *Beloved* revolves around the life of Seth, an ex-slave, who had to murder her own daughter in order to save her baby from the unimaginable life and torture of slavery. The daughter she killed years ago comes back as an young woman named Beloved, a ghost, the same

age as her daughter would have been if she was alive.

The presence of two opposing subjects of magic and real in *Beloved* expresses the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized discourse in a post-colonial context. In post-colonial terminology, the hegemonic discourse of the colonizer is reflected through realism and the elements of magic refers to the strategy of resistance and the struggle or battle used by colonized. Magical realism is used as a tool to fill in the gaps of cultural representation in a post-colonial context by recapturing the fragmented bits and voices of forgotten histories from the point of view of the colonized. The dose of magical realism in *Beloved* not only addresses historical issues critically in an attempt to cure the historical wounds which in turn reflects history but also it attempts to change it. Thus *Beloved* can be read as a postcolonial historiography intervention, a strategic re-location of history of America in the lives of the historically deprived African American.

By considering the world in term of binary oppositions it relates of dominance is established in the Imperial world by the binary logic of imperialism. The hegemonic values of the western culture benefits the formal realism, the logical and the ordinary rather than the mysterious and fantastic. This western medium defines the European culture or practices through non-European characters in the text and relies on social and scientific terms to describe the society that supports the ideology that European view is universal. If one thinks magical realism from one place of another and knows that magical realism brings out non-logical and non-scientific accounts from things, it would be clear to see that the offensive power of magical realism provides a medium to attack the assumptions of the dominant culture and logical truth. This results in the formation of decolonized space that which is not taken by the notion and techniques of European realism. Wendy B Farris has coined the term "devocalizations" 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" (154).

In magical realism, the focalization-the perspective from which events are presented is not exactly established; the kinds of perceptions in present are indescribable and the origins of those perceptions are unelectable. That undefined results from the fact that magical realism contains two conflicting kinds of perception that perceive two different kinds of event: usually the magical events or images are not conveyed to the reader of realistic fiction normally because they are not factually verifiable. Thus magical realism gives a twist in the conventions of realism based on factual evidence, by including other kinds of perception. In other words, the narrative is "devocalized" as it seems to emerge from two different major perspectives at once.

The devocalised or voiceless narrative structure of *Beloved* challenges the dominant European realism and as the result of this, the text is considered as a powerful decolonizing agent. The disruptive power of magical realism emerges 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 origin of this offensive and disruptive feature of magical realism narrative in *Beloved* lies in the face that, once the reader finds the category of the real is not define then all assumptions of truth become vague. The novel is a fiction but at the same time the setting is realistic, this questioned the world outside the fiction being less important. No difference between the magical spirit world or the real world is to be found in the novel, also there is no difference between the past and the future, living and the dead. Seth and her daughter accept *Beloved* even after learning that she is the reincarnation of her dead child. Here the ghosts of the dead prosper in magical realist fiction. According to Faris, cultural rebirth in a colonized society only emerges if one is dead.

The encounter with the dead or the spirits acquires great significance in this context because of the cultural pasts and the belief present in the magical realism. In a similar process to the beginning rites that enacts the ritual experience of symbolic

death and rebirth, readers and the societies are strengthened by themselves through narratives that bridge the worlds of living and dying cultures. Thus through these narratives the colonized nations experience and resembles the kinds of death and rebirth which helps to rediscover and vanish the native belief from the face of the colonizers.

Since "ghosts make absence present", Louis 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" (Zamora 498). As quoted by Zamora, they "embody fundamental magical realist that sense that reality always exceeds our capabilities to describe or understand or prove and that the function of literature is to engage this excessive reality, to honour that which may grasp intuitively but never fully or finally define" (498). As the reality is known and is predictable and controllable, the ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is oppositional in the scientific and materialistic world. The absence of slavery in the past is produced again when the ghost arrives after years of death as she was also the victim of slavery. The ghost of *Beloved* exposes the heritage of slavery. Morrison even connects the spirit of *Beloved* to the "sixty million and more" by uniting her spirit to a woman who died on one of the slave ships. *Beloved* gives a note on the experience on the slave ship:

I am always crouching the men on my face is dead.... in the beginning the woman are away from men and the men are away from the woman storms rock us and mix the men into the woman and the woman 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* 248-250).

When Denver asks *Beloved* about her whereabouts, she replies by saying "Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in...a lot of people is down there. Some is dead" (88). This account can be linked to that of a typical slave ship experience mentioned earlier. The ship was crowded and the slaves were stuffed between on another that they couldn't even move themselves and there was very less space for their foot. It was

impossible for the slaves to breath air and also the place was too hot for them to bear. The condition on the ship was so miserable to survive. There was no food to eat and woman along with children was left to starve in the humid atmosphere. There was not even water to quench their thirst that in one occasion when the water was provided all of them went mad that they ran over one another like animals to get a single drop of water. When Beloved is out of water she too 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” (61-62). During the conversation with Sethe, Beloved believes that the image Sethe’s mother, saying that, “I see 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” (250-251). This account may also describe Beloved’s representation of the millions of Africans killed during the passage from freedom to slavery. Morrison brings this character into the novels so that she can speak to the living about the lives of the dead.

The most important feature of magical realism is myth, legends and folklore, so Morrison had mainly focussed on the oral culture of African American to return black historical experiences. The African American ex-slaves were not placed centrally when considering the privileged centres of power. But at the same time they were independent to raise their voices of being different. Morrison attains a political meaning by incorporating ancestral myths as it brings back the identity that was lost once because of slavery. The literature of the African American’s were marginalized as they were once marginalized in their own land. Writers like Morrison were able to bring a change to this perspective and the works once that were invisible came out to be visible to the whole world. Invisibility is a recurrent theme in African-American works, it also forms an image directly related to the supernatural because it represents the invisible as contradictory to the real or visible.

Morrison’s narrative is highly influenced by African American oral culture and mythology

adapted from West African culture. The reason for Morrison’s strong connection to her ancestors is that because she is aware of the fact that, it is the ancestors who were the culture holders. The involvement of magic realism helped her to use the folklores of the black rather than involving the authorized beliefs of Western world. Her mysterious character Beloved is said to be the mixture of Abiku, Bakalu and Orisha, Oshun of West African Yoruba mythology.

According to the Yoruba mythology, Abiku who is dead comes back in the form of a child to be born as the baby of the same mother. So the term is used to refer to the return of spirits in the form of children who dies . Brenda Cooper quotes

“it is the wilful spirit child, who masquerades as human baby, only to recurrently die and re-born, causing grief and mischief among the living...its issues is a commentary on the health of the human condition”. Beloved is the reflection of Abiku baby who does not have a clear existence (50).

The opening lines of the novel is “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (3). The narrator states that:

the woman of the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put it with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Seth and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old-as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar);as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard) (3).

The Abiku babies torment their mothers by becoming spirits in the guide of babies, spirits who repeatedly are born, only to die and return to the spirit world. These babies are always hungry and thirsty and follow compressive eating as they are not aware about the satisfaction of being full. “it was as though sweet things were what she was born for. Honey as well as the way 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” (55).

Aware about the limited boundaries of magic and real, Morrison's text *Beloved* was able to claim that African American ancestral folklore has an immense power to be transformative. Her voiceless or devocalized structure in the text raises questions about the validity of traditional assumptions that has been accepted and taken for granted among literary Western historians and critics. Her texts were able to break the assumptions of Western empiricism and also at the same time it questions the contradictory terms magic and real from the viewpoint of another narrative tradition that lacks those assumptions and oppositions. She has used this instance to make specific political commentary on the condition and status of the African American in postcolonial nation. With the application of magic realism into the hegemonic Western culture of the novel she was able to alter the Western native binary on which Western realism is based. According to the devocalized or voiceless narrative of Morrison, magical realism moves discursive power from the colonizer to the colonized like the postcolonial works follow and also it offers a fictional space in which other different narrative visionary images and history can be envisioned. She was able to restore life to the texts of the African American that were once put down by the dominant.

Summing up, postcolonial literature basically deals with the crisis of the subaltern in colonized societies and also the difficulties of building up an independent national identity after colonial reign. These struggles of identity, history, recognition and future of the African American are evident in most of the magical realist works of Toni Morrison. By introducing a magical mysterious character *Beloved*, with a narrative voice, the *Beloved* shatters the conventional concept of reality. So *Beloved* can be interrupted or perceived as a product of literature that was trapped in the strong rustic chains of literature. Morrison's work was able to complete the principle of American literature that ignored the life of African Americans who were oppressed.

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