

## **Magic Realism: Canvassing the Mind in Bessie Head's Maru**

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### **Abstract:**

Bessie Amelia Head, one of the most renowned African woman writers, explores the effects of racial oppression. Her novels portray the intricate relationships that exist between the constructive identity and racial discreteness. Being bi-racial, she experienced discrimination even in her birth place as well as in her adopted land Botswana. Head's novels can be seen as a systematic study of women's roles and handicaps in society, especially in an unjust one like South Africa. She has also x-rayed their emotional, psychological and spiritual endowments in the context of human society. Her women characters are always thrust into a resisting landscape from which they must transcend and realize their identity. This paper focuses on the magical realism in her novels that can be seen through the psychological sphere of her fictional characters.

**Keywords:** Magical Realism, racial discreteness, violence

Postcolonial literature is the outcome of the conflict between the imperial culture and the indigenous native culture. As Pathania reflects "It is naïve to assume that independence can totally obliterate colonialism. Colonialism, which brings new values, new beliefs, new aspirations, cannot be just shed like the skin of a snake and then tossed away and forgotten. The vestiges of colonialism continue to haunt cultures and societies until long after the period of direct colonialist control (7). African literature in particular, is a result of this confrontation between the foreign and the native cultures. It is the creative and realistic articulation of the postcolonial artist haunted by the sense of inferiority, oppression, revolt against the colonialists, along with the significant concept of hybrid or crossed identity of the people caught 'in between'.

Of the South African women writers, Bessie Head represents the postcolonial consciousness through her fiction. Born to a black man and a white woman, Bessie Head suffered as a coloured racist and was tormented by the dictates of the patriarchal society. Head completely left South Africa to settle in Botswana where she lived as a stateless person for years. She herself expresses the amalgamation of two cultures which gets reflected in her fiction:

There're two sorts of persons in me. There's a practical person: I love the everyday world and the things that people do with their hands... . The two writers who had the greatest influence on me in my youth were the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, and the English writer D. H. Lawrence. Brecht with his insistence on practicality...The other writer who had a huge influence on the type of person that I am- because there was a period when I wanted to read nothing else- was the British writer D. H. Lawrence. It was the things Lawrence explored Lawrence's huge view of life. (Mackenzie & Clayton, 1989, P8-9)

The impact of these two writers could be witnessed both in the theme and technicalities of Head's writings. This paper focuses on the technique of Magical realism implemented by Head in her second novel Maru (1971). Bessie Head's second novel Maru deals with the assimilation of a subaltern other in a Masarwa woman Margaret Cadmore named after her adoptive white mother. Magical realism includes exaggeration, unusual humour, magical and bizarre events, dreams that come true and superstitions that prove warranted. It is different from pure fantasy in that it combines fantastic elements with recognizable characters, believable dialogues, true to life setting, matter of fact tone, and plot that collaborate historic events. The term Magical realism was first used in a wider post colonial context in the foundational essay by Jacques Stephen Alexis, 'Of the Magical realism of the Haitians (Alex 1956). The term became popularized when it was employed to characterize the work of South American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

In Botswana, the arid landscape has meant that writers like Bessie Head explored other awareness of magic realism in their works. Bessie Head explains magic realism through the psychological sphere in which her characters enter the souls of other characters through a mental channel. For example the Maru is a tale of an abandoned young Masarwa girl who is brought up by a white lady who seeks to find a normal education and a dose of European mannerism which leads to prejudice toward the Masarwa. Maru, after whom the novel is named, is a chief of Dilepe village who competes for the masarwa girl, named Margaret Cadmore after her foster mother, with Moleka who is a close friend of Maru. Maru's character manipulates the masarwa maiden Margaret Cadmore junior by influencing her visions. In Maru the characters become a setting for magic realism. Consequently, magic realism operates in a confined yet expansive sphere. In other words, the limited space of the body becomes through the mind a fathomless arena where one's thoughts and actions can be manipulated. Maru does this to huge effect in getting Margaret Cadmore to be his future wife, ultimately denying Moleka, his rival, from winning but through scheming and underhanded tactics.

In Maru the use of magic realism has around the bush setting entirely. So that the writer has been forced by the dictates of environment to use magic realism in a way that challenges conventional portrayal of such in African literature. The bush setting is not handled by Head because the writer does not have that option available to her. Head's Maru, the magic realism develops within the mind of the character. The mind permits Maru to achieve his ambition of a humanity that is not affected by ethnic discrimination. Magic realism in Maru admit one to see that magic realism, despite of its choice of setting shows the possibility of a better future than that currently experienced in the real world with Maru. Head has fewer options regarding the physical setting. In other words, the village of Dilepe is an arid outpost that has none of the necessary conditions to analyze the type of magic realism that derives into something more profound than what it is at first. The lack of the bush setting, with its connotations of the unknown,

darkness and chaos which mean use of magic realism Head make use of the mind as a canvas through which characters communicate a great depth, philosophical awareness of existence. Due to this awareness, it is possible to live in a society to argue that Bessie Head's use of magic realism in the way that she has suits the purpose of what she intended. One must adhere to the principle that the writer is not the final authority on such matters. The International Fallacy posits that is not advisable to rely on authors to give substantive interpretations of what they write about because when published such works become public and liable to be interpreted in whatever manner. The oral tradition with its different tales becomes a foundation out of which the traditional African experience is disclosed.

The village of Dilepe does not give physical setting that can enable the fantastical to flourish. Head uses the mind as an alternative system through. So that unreal can gain some credibility. Maru's mind becomes for Head replace for the lack of setting that one would find in the oral tradition. The readers can see the future visions through the Margaret Cadmore paintings which she makes. This is the physical representations of Maru's utopia and from these drawings there is the final concrete step of the house itself and the married couple that is for shadowed at the beginning of the novel. In Maru the magic realism is such that it moves from the visions to the paintings and consequently to the reality.

She learns the art of painting and transforms prominent uplifts to her identity in her Masarwa community. As an orphan, she is marginalized by her race. She serves as a mediator between two tribes. One owing to her natural birth and another adopted one. It is through her paintings that Margaret assimilates both the bushman native attributes and western values. For example in creating a painting for Maru she depicts her inspiration as,

One picture was of a house. Everything around it and the house itself was black, but out of the windows shone a queer light. It did not look like lamplight and it revolved gently. While I concentrated on the picture, it slowly faded and another it took its place. There was a wide open sky, but when I looked at my feet the whole field was filled with yellow daisies. They stirred little a little as though they were dancing. Their movement also created this effect of gently revolving light. The next moment I was surprised to find myself walking alone a footpath between the lovely daisies.... I dropped to the ground and tried to grab hold of the daisies to save myself from the strong wind. At that moment I opened my eyes. The funny thing was, this happened again and again until I put the pictures down on paper. (Maru 310)

The above mentioned three dreams depict the subconscious notion of racial prejudice and the apartheid implications. Margaret represents the black house and the pitch black clouds. Margaret is the subaltern other. It is three step processes. Typical to a marginalized subject, young Margaret produces art to please the majority of her community. Her art serves as an expression of desire to the dominant people too.

As Maru depicts the expression of this type of magic realism which is dependent on the character's life experiences, the readers cannot go beyond or employ images outside the character's reality. In other words, the visions that Maru gives Margaret Cadmore do not feature settings outside what he knows to exist. It is a magic realism unimaginable in the way one sees in Okri's work. There are no demons, spirit women and so on. This is because in Maru, the village of Dilepe does not have these occurrences and so

his visions cannot planned what is not in his reality. The Magic realism that Maru reveals in the visions he provides Margaret is one of paintings and feature physical structures and people of opposing cultures. Margaret reveals to her friend Dikeledi, who is also Maru's brother, the dreams she has been experiencing. I looked up again and a little way ahead I saw two people embrace each other. I started quite hard because they were difficult to see. Their forms were black like the house and the sky but, again, they were surrounded by this yellow light. I felt so shamed, thinking I had come across a secret which ought not to be disclosed (Maru 98) . She is not aware that the two people in her dream are Maru and herself. Furthermore, the house that she sees is their future matrimonial house. Maru has infused visions into her unconscious self in order to prepare her for his plan of eloping with her so as to bring hope to the masarwa who are still slaves of the powerful tribes. The secret should not be disclosed that a chief of a tribe is going to get married an outcast. This is Maru's reality and he has to infiltrate the dreams of Margaret and prepare her for what is going to happen. Magic realism builds on a given reality and expands on it. The center of magic realism is one must acknowledge the symbolic relationships. Barhoun states that Magical realism subverts the traditional binary opposition between realism and fantasy, not by placing fantasy in a dominant position over realism but by favouring multiplicity and holding both fantasy and realism in a state of equal existence.(78) Jackson states that, the fantastic merges "elements of both the marvelous and the mimetic" (35). So there has to be some grounded reality both physically and mentally in the world of magic realism and that reality is informed by the writer's own cultural experience.

Another significant painting Margaret carves is dedicated to her first and true love Moleka. This scene is set in a tranquil mode. A village sunset with Moleka in a humble pose and Margaret hearing on his shoulder. Head picturizes it as,

It was as though she had put out her hand and said : 'No no, don't go so soon. I can't manage without you. I need someone to lean on. Because he still stood there, at the door, in that arrested, humble pose and she stood, the days through, quietly learning on his shoulders. (Maru 319)

It must be understood that the magic realism which is shown in Maru is limited in terms of what Maru the character can project. The bush setting also enabled magic realism to make more scope and intent. The use of a bush setting permits the writer to use magic realism where the mind becomes a platform for the surreal. In Maru the magic realism is one without the oral tradition. This more than anything greatly limits the way in which it can be manipulated by the writer. Without this other setting of the realism that is grounded in the mind. For instance, Maru is confronted by his spy, Ranko, who reports that Margaret Cadmore is dying. She has just heard the news that impregnated Dikeledi. Maru remarks, "Is she sick, Ranko?"(Maru116). By 'others things' Maru is commenting on how Margaret need to reflect on Maru's vision of marrying across cultural divides and hence destroying the prejudice that underpins this society. The only way Margaret can get this insight, according to Maru, is to suffer an emotional form of paralysis. Maru uses magic realism in a punitive manner. He is not like Ranko and he knows very well that the reason of the women's grief is a broken heart. There is no empathy, just a cold deduction of occurrences. When he approaches, he offers not to understand or shows his love. But it shows his vindictive nature. "It's not an ailment you die of. Sometimes you recover in a moment, especially when the cause of it is a worthless man like Moleka." (Maru 17) After this he leaves the village and settles in an alienated land with her to start a new life.

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As W.J.T. Mitchell expresses that the very art of a painting makes it the "other" for a vocalized description. To emphasize an ekphrastic moment, Mitchell notes, is to engender liminal spaces which serve as sites in the narrative. African novels have exploited ekphrastic positioning themselves in postmodern aesthetics most of the novels that use visual arts as a trope to picturize the postcolonial spaces in Africa. Bessie Head through the visual art representations has projected the technique of Magical realism to insist on the subconscious mind of her protagonist Margaret Cadmore.

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