Magical Realism and the Problem of Self-Identity as Seen in three Postcolonial Novels

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Abstract

Among the challenges faced by postcolonial African literature are the presumptions and naïveté of Westerners. The Western reader typically assumes Africans have nothing to write about outside their feelings about Westerners. As much as Africa is shaped by independence and neocolonialism, identity cannot be understood purely as a reaction to Euro American influences any more than by viewing literature produced in contemporary Africa in a vacuum. Rather, much of contemporary African literature seeks to conceptualize identity as an observation of tradition with a vision to the future: identity is formed neither by reminiscing about a Romantic past nor by decontextualizing the past. Many African texts abstract the difficulty of asserting non-colonial identity while overcoming colonial history with the use of magical realism. This paper offers a theoretical and historical background associating the conventions of magical realism with postcolonial texts before providing a close reading of three post-war African novels, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (1953), Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) and K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* (2013). These novels each deploy magic realism as a way to abstract a project of self-making that appreciates a history of colonialism yet seeks to break free from external identifiers. Through magic realism, these novels demonstrate African literature's interest in self-making and provide a case for a self-constructed African identity that acknowledges and departs from the continent's colonized history.
Keywords: African literature, magical realism, postcolonialism, self-identity

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Magical realism is commonly known as a technique portraying magical or unreal elements as a natural part in an otherwise realistic or mundane environment. Strecher (1999) defines magical realism as something that happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe. Magical realism was first associated with Latin American literature, particularly with authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927- 2014) and Isabel Allende (1942-). It is a literary trend in postmodernism, in which magical elements are introduced into a realistic atmosphere with a view to have a deeper understanding of reality. These magical elements are explained and accepted like normal occurrences, and are presented in a straight forward and matter-of-fact manner (Hart, 1989). The term magical realism was first applied to literature in the 1940s by the Cuban novelists (Flores, 1995). Magical realism portrays fantastical events in a realistic tone. It makes folk tales and myths of contemporary social relevance. Writers do not invent new worlds but reveal the magical elements existing in this world. In the binary world of magical realism, the supernatural realm blends with the natural, familiar world. The narrator in such writings is indifferent, he does not explain the fantastic events; the story proceeds with a logical precision as if nothing extraordinary took place. Magical events are presented as ordinary occurrences; therefore a reader accepts the marvelous as normal and common. The reader would also consequently disregard the supernatural as false testimony (Strecher, 1999).

Moreover, magical realism contains an implicit criticism of society, particularly the elite. The plots in magical realistic novels characteristically employ hybrid multiple planes of reality that take place in juxtaposed arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, western and indigenous, and so on (Arva, 2008). Overall, they establish a more profound and genuine reality than conventional realistic techniques. Many renowned writers have employed this technique in their works; Amos Tutuola (1920 –1997), Bessie Head (1937 –1986), and K. Sello Duiker (1974 –2005), are among them.

The Kenyan writer Wainaina (2005), discusses in his sarcastic article, "How to Write About Africa," that among the challenges faced by postcolonial African literature are the presumptions and naïveté of Westerners. Wainaina's satire points to the deeply rooted notion of the arrogance of the Western reader that assumes Africans have nothing to write about outside their feelings about Westerners (p. 91). As much as Africa is shaped by independence and neocolonialism, identity cannot be understood purely as a reaction to Euro American influences any more than by viewing literature produced in contemporary Africa in a vacuum (Palmer,1979). Rather, much of contemporary African literature seeks to conceptualize identity as an observation of tradition with a vision to the future: identity is formed neither by reminiscing about a romantic past nor by decontextualizing the past. Many African texts abstract the difficulty of asserting non-colonial identity while overcoming colonial history with the use of magical realism (Wainaina, 2005, p. 91). The use of magical realism not only communicates the mundane conditions that each text arises out of, but, by inserting the fantastic, each text communicates the oscillating anxiety and hope for the postcolonial world. The three novels under consideration; Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard and Dead Palm-wine Tapster in the Dead's Town (1953)*, Bessie Head's *A Question of Power (1974)* and K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents (2013)*, observe the cognitive difficulty of forming a postcolonial African identity

through the literary device of magical realism. Before discussing how each novel uses magical realist conventions to explore Africa's self-identification, this paper will first discuss more generally how magical realism has been historically used in postcolonial literature to negotiate problems in self-making.

Magical realism is a principally anti-modern literary phenomenon that places the supernatural or the inexplicable alongside the mundane, everyday problems. The inclusion of supernatural elements in otherwise conventionally realist fiction—which is the stylistic approach of modernist writers—subverts the values of the modernist text. Magic realism becomes a method of undercutting modernist ontology:

> The thematic core of the magical realist writing mode at any of its stages concerns representation: the writing of the real. Magical realist authors turn to illusion and magic as a matter of survival in a civilization priding itself on scientific accomplishments, positivist thinking, and the metaphysical banishment of death. (Arva, 2008, p. 62)

 Therefore, magic realism can be seen as a means of coping with the failures of the modern world; it reasserts spirituality lost in the march toward modern progress and becomes an abstraction for a reality that no longer exists. Magical realism, then, is a representation of a forgotten history. In this sense, it is an attempt to transcend the modern understanding of the world as not a physical reality but as an ever constructed simulation of values (66). Indeed, scholars such as De La Campa (1999) have noted how effective magical realism is at speaking to postmodernism's interests:

> There is no question but that the fictional disruption of logic, linear space, identity, and chronology found in magical realism can roughly coincide, at a thematic or topical level, with postmodern practices: metafiction, the motif of wording the world, a decoupling of signification from preferentiality, and the narratological precept that all of history, including pre-modern worlds, has been freed for inventive rewriting. (p. 213)

It is broadly useful, then, to think of magical realism as the fictional praxis of the postmodern aspiration. Magical realism is a countercurrent to modernity.

However, it may be useful to add that, while magical realism is a postmodern convention, it does not fall into the trap of worshipping a lost past, as much postmodernist writing does. In his evaluation of postmodernism, Jameson (2010) argues that the postmodern writings tend to privilege the past uncritically "without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to . . . what is being imitated is rather comic" (p. 1849). So, while magical realism is connected to the postmodern critique of modernism, it is not a purely nostalgic effort. Rather, magical realism seeks to observe what modernity has concealed:

> The magical realist text (as offshoot of the fantastic genre) deliberately disorients readers exactly in order to make them more aware of their world and to strengthen their sense of belonging in it. One must understand the magical realist universe not as a flight from reality but as a flight simulator, an artificial world within the real world, meant to prepare us for a better grasp of it. (Arva, 2008, pp. 78-79)

Thus magical realism, having developed out of postcolonial traditions (Warnes, 2005), becomes a way of reintroducing an uncolonized and unmodern voice into the text while maintaining a critical view of the past so that it may crystallize the experiences of colonization: "…between pain and imagination can be mapped the whole fictional strategy of magical realism, in which appearances are made more real than the real" (Arva, 2008, p.75). Magical realism vocalizes a lost history to pursue an alternative to modernism, which has considerable use for postcolonial texts and critics.

Indeed, magical realism is a constructive mode of meaning-making that acts as a gestalt of regional literatures. As described by Grzęda (2013):

> Uniting both contentious narrative strands—realism's faithfulness to the socio-political context and postmodernism's devotion to formal experimentation, syncretism, and meta-fiction—magical realism relies heavily on African oral traditions, and in doing so, it not only constitutes a point of confluence for black and white writing as distinguished by [Jabulani] Mkhize, but it also epitomizes the reconciliation of Eurocentric Western rationalism and African tradition. (P.157)

This demonstrates the hope embedded in the genre that a new identity can be forged in the post colony. This new identity, while not forgetful of the colonized experience, can, at least partially, reclaim some lost or stolen heritage, critique the Eurocentric metropolis and express agency against the global hegemony (Warnes, 2005, p.13). In the postcolonial text, magical realism becomes the language for self-identification paradoxically because it is as alienating to the postcolonial subject as the post colony is. Given the literary function of magical realism as a tool for self-making in the hegemony and its history in postmodernism and postcolonial objectives, it should come as no surprise that magical realism is replete in African literature.

As with other postcolonial literatures, texts originating in Africa explore the crosscurrent of modern and postcolonial identities through fantasy and imagination. More contemporarily, Nigerian filmmakers explore magic realism as part of a rich, recent trend in African story telling. As noted by Eghagha (2007), there is a growing corpus of literary works that draws upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folktale, yet does so in such a way that neither of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other. This capacity to resolve the tension between two discursive systems usually thought of as mutually exclusive and must constitute the starting point for any inquiry into magical realism (p.72). This can clearly explain the role of magic realism in African art's self-exploration and in the attempt to integrate multiple dimensions in self-making. Again, even though the author is more specifically interested in Nigerian film, the use of the fantastic as an identity maker can be seen throughout African literatures. As in Eghagha's analysis of Nigerian film, Grzęda (2013) finds magical realism used regularly in South African fiction to discuss themes of identity-making in the face of colonialism:

> Merging postmodern and neo-realist narrative techniques, conjoining black and white writing traditions in South Africa, blending African derived belief-systems with Western modes of thought and perception, blurring boundaries between fact and fiction, and

eroding divisions between the past and the present, magical realism appears to be a narrative of reconciliation par excellence. (p.171)

Thus, there are close connections not only between magical realism and postcolonial identity formation, but also to literature emerging out of Africa, particularly in Nigeria and in South Africa, the birthplaces of the authors in this analysis (albeit at different times during the twentieth century).

The three novels under consideration, *The Palm Wine Drinkard, A Question of Power* and *Thirteen Cents* demonstrate much of the tension emblematic in postcolonial identity-making while also using magic realism in an attempt to negotiate the conflicting influences on the African text's capacity to self-make. Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, published in 1953, intuitively realized that the more common 'broken English', or Patois, would not suffice to capture the sounds of its community—a world that was too realistic "to be liminal, too paranormal to be realistic", each segment intersecting with others according to its own laws—to impose a congruous existence on the imagination (Soyinka, 1988). The language used in the novel points to the confluence of identities inside the text and in the culture that produced it. Published over a decade before Nigerian independence, it nonetheless anticipates the postcolonial use of magical realism as a method of expressing an autonomous voice in the face of colonial history. The drinkard's fantastical journey after the death of his only friend, the tapster, takes him through several supernatural locations and in contact with a variety of fabulous creatures and magical people. Throughout, the drinkard identifies himself as "'Father of the gods' who could do everything in this world" (Tutuola, 1953, p. 11), which, though certainly an empowering title, and one which alludes to the magic powers he uses frequently to escape danger. This title, simultaneously, illustrates the drinkard's unstable, transitory identity in the post-colony. The drinkard is the eldest son of a wealthy man who holds titles and power—both political and magical—yet both his father and the tapster die suddenly and without any apparent reason. In spite of his power, the drinkard is helpless without the people he depended on around him; thus, his journey to rescue the tapster from death is one to reclaim some of the personal history he knew and depended on.

Moreover, many of the fantastic creatures the drinkard encounters in his journey suffer from a fragmented identity. Among the most memorable is the complete gentleman, who is described as a beautiful man wearing the finest and most expensive clothes. However, the drinkard's evaluation of the complete gentleman's beauty comes in the following, "…if he had been an article or animal for sale, he would be sold at least for ₤2000 (two thousand pounds)" (p, 15). Here the gentleman is given value as a piece of property and livestock, and he stands as the novel's first real figure of tension between traditional and modern values. Where the gentleman is immediately recognized as a "complete" man, whose physique is imposing, the drinkard can only conceptualize the gentleman's value in a capitalist appraisal of his body. In the ensuing chapter, the drinkard follows the complete gentleman home through a forest, where the gentleman rents pieces of his body out to people along the way, until he is a skinless skull hopping along the road (pp. 15-19). This is a similar allusion to the gentleman's capitalist value as a physical body, stripped of all its former appeal and "completeness." Finally, the adventure ends with the Lady (the drinkard's eventual wife), trapped in a hole filled with living skulls like the complete gentleman. In this fantastical passage, the Lady—a figure of traditional, folk

wisdom who joins the drinkard in his journey for the rest of the novel—is held hostage by the monsters made by reducing once complete African bodies to capital.

However, the complete gentleman is not demonized as an antithesis to an ideal past. The drinkard notes that if the complete gentleman ever went to battle, bombs would refuse to detonate near him out of admiration for his beauty (p. 21) which indicates that before he is stripped of his body parts, the gentleman has a place—even power—in a modern, immediately post-war world. While the drinkard eventually rescues and marries the Lady, this magical realist episode nonetheless captures the tension between identities. Although the complete gentleman is wrapped in fine clothing, he does not act like a villain until he rents out pieces of himself. The gentleman does not aggress against the Lady and the traditions she represents at the apex of his modern embodiment, it is instead when he is dissolved of any identity that he and people like him are made into monsters. It is only through the fantastic that The Palm Wine Drinkard can adequately represent the difficulty of identifying with either the forces of modernity or of tradition.

Of course, the phantasmagoria of *The Palm Wine Drinkard* overcomes the realism so completely that the "realist" themes in the drinkard's grief and anxiety in finding a place in a transitory world can be overshadowed by the folkloric and fantastic events of the novel. Therefore, Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* provides a useful comparison to Tutuola's seminal first novel. Although *A Question of Power* still voices many of its themes of identity through magic realism, the "realism" is far more prominent than in *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. The protagonist, Elizabeth, arrives in Botswana as a refugee from South Africa's apartheid government. Elizabeth suffers from a nervous breakdown and during heightened episodes of insomniac stress she is visited by two figures—Sello, a man from the village she lives in, and Dan, her ex-husband from South Africa—and several phantom women they bring with them. These ghostly, magical visits are where Elizabeth's conflicting identities wrestle for control over her mind. The novel is divided between two sections, the first where she is visited by different versions of Sello and an apparition of Medusa, and the second where she is visited by Dan and the mutated personas of traditional feminine roles. Elizabeth describes herself under the tyranny of Sello—a humble man who identifies with all mankind—and Dan—Sello's friend who is manipulative, deceitful and greedy as, respectively, "both God and Satan at the same time" (Head, 1964, p.11) illustrating not just the extreme contrast between both these forces of identity in her, but also of the spiritual gravitas she feels in trying to assert herself against them.

Moreover, Elizabeth occupies the boundaries between identities: as a colored woman, she is neither black nor white; as a South African, she feels alienated in her new community in Botswana; as an educated woman, she is welcomed by white Europeans in the development projects but she cannot belong with them. Although Elizabeth shares the same utopian vision of a global community as her soul twin, the living Sello (p.12), the apparition of Sello in her mind constantly torments her for not belonging. Medusa, the woman accompanying the ghost of Sello, tells Elizabeth, "Africa is troubled waters, you know. I'm a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You'll only drown here. You're not linked up to the people. You don't know any African languages" (p. 44). Medusa criticizes Elizabeth's lack of belonging and constantly presses her to endorse the racialism she escaped in South Africa: "...you hate Africans. You don't like the African hair. You don't like the African nose..." (p. 48). Elizabeth's first and most vocal monster

is one of racialism, who exploits and voices her lack of belonging. When Elizabeth overcomes her racial anxiety she "defeats" Medusa, tying the mythic figure to her own task of self-making, (p. 98). Not only do Sello and Medusa voice Elizabeth's anxiety about not belonging, but only by interacting with these ghostly figures is she able to enact some agency over her own subjectivity. However, even with Medusa defeated, her second spiritual visitor, Dan, further complicates her self-construction.

Dan's arrival disrupts Elizabeth's brief respite and her first steps of belonging in her new community. Like Sello, Dan is a supernatural projection of a real person and, like Sello, Dan is accompanied by several other monstrous feminine personas. While Elizabeth does not enter in the same confrontational relationship with all of them as she did with Medusa, Dan treats every one of the feminine personas as sexual objects, swapping them, voluntarily or not, in his insatiable, aggressive sexuality. Where Sello's visits deliberately attacked Elizabeth's insecurity and anxieties of belonging, Dan is more recklessly destructive. When he first visits Elizabeth she laments,

> Hadn't she faced terrible hazards? Hadn't she been hit and hit with no defense or protection against supernatural thunderbolts? 'I'll protect you forever, silly girl,' [Dan] said. He gave the impression of power to match his words. In this soul-to-soul contact Dan also said, quite abruptly: 'I don't care what I do.' (p. 114)

Dan arrives in Elizabeth's life precisely when she is weakest and his recklessly toxic and aggressive masculinity threatens her blossoming sense of self. While Dan alienates Elizabeth's gender as much as Sello alienates her race, Dan is also emblematic of a nationalistic post-colony (Ravenscroft, 1976, p.180). The magically real Dan expresses an anxiety of self-making that threatens Africa as a part of a global community. When speaking with her friend, Tom, about the American Black-Power movement, Elizabeth argues,

> Any heaven, like a Black-Power heaven, that existed for a few individuals alone was pointless and useless. It was an urge to throttle everyone else to death. Didn't she know about it in Southern Africa? Wasn't she a part of it in feeling when there was so much despair and so little hope? (Head, 1974, pp.133-34)

It is significant to note here that Dan arrives in Elizabeth's life only after she has overcome her own limitations because it illustrates that an Africa led by those who "sweep the crowd by weeping and wailing about the past [so they can] steal and cheat the people once they get into government..." (p.132) are as detrimental to African self-identification as the forces of colonization. Dan is irresponsibly interested in power for its own sake and the danger that attitude poses to Africa is abstracted through his supernatural presence in Elizabeth's mind. *A Question of Power*, though largely a realist novel, conceptualizes the dangers faced in the frail post-colony (Ravenscroft, 1976). Two haunting, supernatural, religious figures come to measure one woman's quest for self-identification. The novel's interest in global belonging is further identified in the references Sello and Dan both make to non-African literary histories, and Elizabeth's eventual success only comes by overcoming the fantastical spirits threatening her individual identity and Africa's identity in a globally humanist world.

Though *A Question of Power* is ultimately hopeful in Elizabeth's quest to self-identify against the magic realist forces repressing her voice, self-making is not as conclusive or as hopeful as in K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents*. As with the other two texts, the protagonist of *Thirteen Cents*, Azure, exists between identities while elements of magic realism explore the tension involved in his effort to build his sense of self. Azure's self-understanding is imposed far more by external factors than either of the other two characters in this analysis. The novel's first line sets the tone for the many identities imposed upon him from outside, "My name is Azure. Ah-zoo-ray. That's how you say it. My mother gave me that name. It's the only thing I have left from her" (Duiker, 2013, p.1). Azure introduces the text specifically with the external source of his identification: he is who his mother says he is. This external identification is paralleled when the gangster, Gerald, renames him Blue (p. 65). To both his lost natural mother and his current surrogate father he is the same thing: the color blue but referred to with different signifiers. Even though he loves and misses his mother and fears and hates Gerald, both have scripted Azure's identity for him such that he cannot perform it to the satisfaction of either.

When Gerald takes Azure under his protection, he mentors him with an almost prophetic tone. Gerald's psychic knowledge of everything that happens in his neighborhood is the novel's first hint at magical realism. Gerald leverages his supernatural knowledge against Azure to secure his obedience and further impose identity on him. Gerald tells Azure,

> "He was cruel, your father. He made you wash in his dirty water. Do you know what that does to you?"
> "No, Gerald."
> "That's why you have blue eyes and love water. You're always thirsty because he did the same to your mother, before you were born…Your father wanted to destroy you. The same way he killed his brother. He hated his brother enough to watch him being killed and he never did anything". (p. 85)

This passage not only inscribes a supernatural importance to Azure's birth (as a reaction to his father exposing him to dirty water), it is also loaded with symbolic meaning relevant to the novel's theme of self-making. Azure's parents—his mother, a victim of violence, his father a perpetrator indifferent to his brother's murder—can be read as a critique of post-apartheid South Africa, where the promise of liberty has been enjoyed by a few but has left the next generation, Azure's, destitute. Gerald provides the only institution—that is, organized crime—that Azure can count on with his parents dead or indifferent. The novel communicates its anxiety toward this identity through the supernatural conversation between the gangster, Gerald, and Azure, his ward. The resolution to this anxiety, though, is further explored with an even more deeply fantastical event that occurs with Azure's two ascents up Table Mountain, both of which include magical events and spiritual guides that Azure, now free from the harsh reality of the city, can experience as a magical alternative to reality.

In his first ascent, Azure encounters a woman named Saartjie (p. 139)—a reference to Saartjie Baartman, a real-life black South African woman who, in the early nineteenth century, was brought to London to be exhibited in a freak show. Saartjie then introduces Azure to T-Rex, Saartjie's husband, Azure's spiritual father and the figure Gerald identifies with back in Cape Town (p. 143). Importantly, T-Rex stands in for Gerald during Azure's ascent up the mountain,

further reinforcing Gerald's role as the protagonist's abusive father-figure; when the novel describes T-Rex devouring rats, the novel communicates how dangerous criminals like Gerald are to South African youth who are, like the rats, vulnerable to the monsters that prey on them. Finally, Azure meets Mantis, Saartjie's father, and therefore Azure's spiritual grandfather and the creator of the sun according to the San religion. Azure's spiritual lineage, then, includes the central figure of a traditional creation myth, a mother figure exploited by colonialism and a fatherly monster that thrives in the undercity. This magical episode illustrates Azure's legacy and inheritance and though these forces wrestle for primacy in his self-understanding, Azure instead unites them to overcome them. When Azure returns to the city, Gerald has been violently and mysteriously killed and his second-in-command, Sealy, credits Azure with the assassination (p.158). However, as Sealy slowly transforms into Gerald by adopting his mannerisms and style, Azure ascends Table Mountain once again. In the novel's conclusion, Cape Town is washed away with water and the sky ignites in fire, the two conflicting forces Azure comes to control throughout the novel. Azure closes the novel, "My mother is dead. My father is dead" (p. 190) to contrast with its opening. With the city and his spiritual heritage destroyed, Azure is free to finally name and perform his own identity. The magical apocalypse grants Azure, and the abandoned post-apartheid generation he represents, the opportunity to construct his own identity and it is only through magical realism that the novel explores this complex tension between exterior and interior identification.

These novels, though separated by national and generational boundaries, share an approach to African literature's project of self-making through magic realism. Although each emphasizes the fantastic and the real to different extents, *The Palm Wine Drinkard, A Question of Power* and *Thirteen Cents* each explore identity in the space between mysticism and modernity without privileging either. In this way, all three are representative of a growing tradition in magical realism to nuance the postcolonial and postmodern interests in questioning and undermining modernity's hold on the global consciousness. However, it is important to note that unlike postcolonialism or postmodernity, the literary device that is magic realism is not interested in value judgements or allegiances. Rather, as in these novels, magic realism is an effort to explore the alternative identities forced by colonialism, not as an instruction manual for how to behave against colonized identities.

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