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Magic Realism and the Politics of Representation: A Comparative Analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Shame* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*

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Abstract

Magic Realism serves as a narrative device that explores themes of postcoloniality, focusing on colonial perspectives and their ramifications. Unlike realism, which emphasizes external reality, and fantasy, which accentuates extraordinary and often problematic elements, Magic Realism intricately weaves truth, imagination, and symbolism, allowing the supernatural to coexist seamlessly with the natural. This interplay creates a tension highlighted by scholars such as Tzvetan Todorov, who suggests it is central to readers' engagement with the uncanny. Despite its significance, scholarly discourse on this topic remains relatively sparse, largely due to the varying perceptions of 'truth' and 'knowledge' across different postcolonial contexts. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), examining how each text employs 'magic realism' and the 'politics of representation' to illuminate the struggles over reality, specifically, which reality is considered true, who possesses an authoritative voice, and whose narrative is deemed authentic and valid. Rushdie's metafictional approach, enriched by elements of magical realism, critiques the constructed nature of fiction, history, and postcolonial identity. Through this lens, he interrogates patriarchal conventions and critiques how concepts of shame and shamelessness can incite violence within the fictional realm of Peccavistan. Similarly, Thiong'o utilizes this narrative form to dissect the political complexities within postcolonial Kenya, questioning the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes in the fictional setting of Aburiria. He advocates the superiority of African communal narratives over colonial discourses, emphasizing the importance of oral traditions, collective memory, and

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rumours. Both novels utilise Magic Realism as articulated through Alejo Carpentier's idea of the 'marvellous real' and Maggie Ann Bowers' theoretical frameworks, thereby presenting truth as conditional and multifaceted. Moreover, the narratorial unreliability inherent in these texts reveals how political authority and representation are socially constructed rather than inherently bestowed. In conclusion, this comparative study posits that Magic Realism should not be regarded as a universal postcolonial strategy. Rather, it ought to be recognised as a contested narrative form that renders visible the diverse epistemologies and political struggles that characterize the postcolonial experience.

Keywords: Magical realism, shame, politics, reality, history, representation

Introduction

When politics becomes so irrational or chaotic that it seems almost unbelievable, fiction often responds by using magical, strange, or fantastical elements to capture that reality more vividly. The term 'magic realism' was first used by Franz Roh in his 1925 book *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* (*After Expressionism: Magical Realism*) to describe modern realistic paintings with a dream-like, fantastic subject, though different from Surrealist paintings. It was first applied to literature independently, with a divergent meaning, by the Italian novelist Massimo Bontempelli in 1927 to characterize modernist fiction (*Camayad-Frexias 3*). The term has been closely associated with Latin American and Caribbean writers in the mid-twentieth century, who tried to blend the ordinary with the marvellous. As H. P. Suma notes, in Latin America during the 1940s, magical realism was a way to express the American realist mentality and to create an autonomous literary style. The label was first used to describe Kafka's and Jorge Luis Borges' texts that had metaphysical fantasy. Some critics describe Jorge Luis Borges as the "first magical realist", connecting the world of European modernists with Spanish literary culture. Critics have noted the "strange seductiveness" of magical realism. The latter formulation can be connected to Fredric Jameson's thesis on the existence of different modes of production in "On Magic Realism in Film" (1986).

Magic realists employ many techniques, such as hybridity and binary oppositions, and link them to postcolonial discourse and authoritarianism. The philosophical significance of the term may highlight cultural differences or describe regional experiences with an authentic voice, different from the conventional Western

modernity. It has evolved into a global "literary language" used by writers in countries experiencing rapid social change, as well as in postcolonial or changing political scenes. David Lodge defines magic realism as a mode in which "marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative," and he suggests that writers shaped by great historical upheavals turned to it because ordinary realism no longer seemed sufficient to represent their worlds (Lodge 114).

Magic realism is often interpreted as a narrative mode for criticising politics by blurring the distinction between the real and the marvellous. It subverts the authority of the dominant discourse and discloses the constructed nature of political truth. In societies marked by authoritarianism, censorship, and, most of all, postcolonial turmoil, magic realism becomes the device through which writers can explore the power functions, how regimes are represented, and how citizens experience shame, fear, and spectacle. In this context, the "politics of representation" becomes a crucial concern: representation is no longer a mere descriptive act but a performative one, through which political reality is constructed, contested, and reimagined.

There is considerable literature on magic realism and several individual analyses of *Shame* and *Wizard of the Crow*; yet two significant gaps remain. First, much of the critical analysis has approached magic realism as a stylistic or generic event, examining formal properties or genealogies within Latin American Literature, without properly questioning how such formal elements are deployed as unconcealed political tactics in particular postcolonial situations. Second, comparative analyses of Rushdie and Ngugi have tried to recognise their shared postcolonial concerns. However, they have rarely explored how the same marvellous techniques are used to produce different political effects (e.g., the conversion of private shame into public censure in *Shame*, as opposed to the mass, satirical spectacle of organized resistance in *Wizard of the Crow*).

This article analyses Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) by reading them through theoretical and critical analyses of magic realism and the representation of politics to show how the marvellous in each text produces a special ethical and political effect. So, it conflates the 'real'

and the 'marvellous' by politicizing the everyday absurd through its very reading by the spectator/ reader, thereby introducing a public ethics of critique. Both novels employ magic realism as a political rather than aesthetic strategy, undermining narrative truths and the theatre of authoritarian regimes while offering another kind of knowledge that can contest state violence, shame, etc.

Therefore, this study draws on Ann Bowers's work, which shows how magic realism constructs plural epistemologies rather than a single 'truth', Todorov's differentiation between the fantastic and the marvellous, and Carpentier's 'lo real maravilloso'. It argues that Rushdie's *Shame* and Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* deploy magic realism as an intentional political tactic that undermines state narratives and compels readers to become connected witnesses.

A Comparative Analysis of *Shame* and *Wizard of The Crow*

In Salman Rushdie's novels, magical elements are often combined with contemporary historical and socio-cultural realities. The use of a deliberate magic realist mode is evident as he depicts realities in which magic occupies a significant position. His first use of this mode is seen in his second novel, *Midnight's Children* (Ghosh 57). His third novel, *Shame*, is another postcolonial allegory set in Pakistan, "Peccavistan," which explores the cycle of violence and 'sharam' (shame). Rushdie's work employs magic realism as a necessity. It entwines the stories of the Shakil, Hyder, and Harappa families, in which the physical distortions of individuals reflect the birth of a nation.

Wizard of the Crow, originally composed in Gĩkũyũ as *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, tells the story of the Free Republic of Aburiria, a fictitious African country ruled by a dictator known as the Ruler and his sycophantic ministers, who are engaged in a power struggle and enjoy plotting against each other in their attempts to win his (the Ruler's) utmost sympathy and love (Osita 73). Ngugi went a lot further than his fellow magic realist writers in his depiction of postcolonial Kenya. He stretches the use of magical realism by making his setting mythical rather than real, giving him the freedom akin to that of a spinner of fairy tales. (Osita 73) It makes the novel more of a political weapon to question the government's corruption.

Shame opens with a description of the town Q in which three Shakil Sisters reside, Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny, only called by their nicknames while slowly becoming a "mythical trinity". After a disastrous yet illuminating party with some selected town people and the Angrez Sahibs and their ladies, the mysterious pregnancy and the mystical sisterly bonding that followed showcase elements of magical realism. When only one of them was wedlocked, all three of them were showing similar symptoms:

> …the sisters, I repeat, displayed the uniquely passionate solidarity that was their most remarkable characteristic by feigning – in the case of two of them – the entire range of symptoms that the third was obliged to display. (Rushdie 19)

Whereas *Wizard of the Crow* begins with five reasons for the ruler's mysterious illness, showcasing Thiong'o's use of oral retelling to display African traditions. He uses polyphonic narration to present these theories, each of which exemplifies a different aspect of the politics of representation. The gossip and rumours spewing everywhere sow the malady that later reveals itself when the ruler bursts from within due to his inner corruption.

The Shakil sisters are involved in planning their pregnancies in *Shame*, along with their 'symptoms', which creates a collective closeness that is underpinned by an economy of secrecy and collusion, where magic mediates a social tie kept off the public record, undermining the codes of honour that regulate a woman's body. Their secrecy and hiding behind doors are their form of living life on their own will. Meanwhile, Ngugi, in *Wizard of the Crow*, describes Rachel, the ruler's wife, as trapped in time, turning a home into a site of punishment and stagnation. The home becomes a memorial-prison where the power of the state is demonstrated by freezing time and through manipulation by state-controlled prayers. In a way, Rushdie illustrates people's ability to come together for mutual protection, while Ngugi shows the state's control, creating a contrast in the 'representation' of people.

Omar Khayyam Shakil was fascinated by the Impossible Mountains, which can be considered one of the novel's fantastic places. When he had just been born, it was the first thing he had seen, which was upside down. This range of mountains had convinced Omar of his being "near the very Rim of Things" (22) and how in the

horizon of the mountains lay "great nothing" (22) into which he would tumble in his nightmares. These mountains, as observed by Rushdie, are indeed impossible to find:

> The Impossible Mountains: you will not find that name in your atlases, no matter how large-scale…thin-eyed, rock-hard tribals who dwelt in those mountains…also called the range 'the roof of paradise'. (Rushdie 23)

The magic mountain is also associated with the idea of "paradise" as a canopy, which is later developed into a valid theoretical construct by Omar Shakil. He places paradise below the surface, rather than above, associating it with tribal lore about angels appearing from crevices in stones, and his brother's personal account of seeing a radiating, winged being, as well as the theory that the movement of the earth is caused by the angels' observation of events on earth. There is thus a reversal of spiritual geography, summarized in the slogan "Hell above, Paradise below" (23). Alejo Carpentier argues that the 'marvelous' is necessarily bound up with the place in which it occurs and the moment in which it is embedded. The 'uncanny' does not come from outside; instead, the world manifests itself. The enchantment of an occurrence is thus necessarily bound up with the quality of what happens in the area, rather than with the speaker's purpose or the author's intention. In the prologue to *The Kingdom of This World*, 'lo real maravilloso' is characterized as a quality of specific cultures rather than as a literary device; in *Wizard of the Crow*, occurrences such as Kamĩtĩ's avian changes or the appearance of money trees are welcomed by Aburĩrians as part of their lived experience. Kamĩtĩ's sensitivity to the "strong odor of decomposing flesh" (530) illustrates how the spiritual sensorium detects economic corruption, locating the marvellous as a form of knowledge separate from and subverting Enlightenment rationalism, and transforming, rather than justifying, political economy.

Rushdie's magical realism allows Sufia Zinobia to shift from "shame" to "shamelessness" by representing her feelings as social anxiety. Her violence is transformed from an individual psychological problem into a social spectacle by giving it a physical manifestation, as she commits violent acts such as attacking Talwar Ulhaq and Omar.

When she wields her supernatural power and transforms into a white panther, Rushdie shifts the focus from the individual to the broader social implications of the act. He uses Sufiya as the embodiment of the "shame" that the political elite want to conceal; she provides a materialist representation of the repression of nationalism, hypocrisy, and patriarchal violence that uphold the state. Meanwhile, Thiong'o uses magic realism as a lens to explore the fictional authoritarian rule of 'the ruler' who receives a gift as "marching to heaven", a thinking of his eyes (Machokali), though said to be a grateful nation's gift to their long-ruling ruler:

> The whole country, the Minister for Foreign Affairs was saying, the entire Aburlrian populace, had decided unanimously to erect a building … so that the Ruler could call on God daily to say good morning or good evening or simply how was your day today, God? (Thiong'o 31)

One understands how Sufiya becomes a mere container of what society refuses to acknowledge. Similar to this pattern, Thiong'o uses the queue mania to show mass humiliation, unemployment, and unlike Zinobia's personal bodily dysfunction or shame, this humiliation becomes repetitive, omnipresent, and public.

Tzvetan Todorov, in *The Fantastic,* defines 'fantastic' as a moment of hesitation between a natural and supernatural explanation. In *Wizard of the Crow*, this hesitation is sometimes maintained, as when Kamĩtĩ sees the scare made of rags as a trick. At the same time, A.G. believes it is real wizardry, thus demonstrating that the moment of suspension of belief itself is a political technology that the state and the popular imagination can harness. In comparison, in *Shame*, Rushdie eliminates the moment of hesitation (for instance, the collective pregnancy of the Shakil sisters and Sufiya's brain fever are stated as facts without hesitation). Thus, the marvellous is presented as a significant tool that publicly accuses repression rather than a personal puzzle to be solved.

In a realistic narrative, according to Todorov, the reader and often the characters hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation for events; in magic realism, this hesitation is absent, and the supernatural is naturalized and integrated into the materiality of literary realism. Similarly, in *Shame*, Sufiya Zinobia's supernatural blushing and beastly transformation, never medicalized but

presented as the nation's repressed shame, are narrated with the same deadpan gravity as Raza Hyder's and Iskander Harappa's politics; likewise, Ngũgĩ treats the queuing mania and the Ruler's ballooning body in *Wizard of the Crow* as literal events in Aburiria.

According to Maggie Ann Bowers in *Magic(al) Realism*, one of the primary functions of magic realism is to serve as a common narrative work for works of fiction that represent the experience of those people who are politically or culturally disempowered, a notion that fits neatly into Rushdie's narrative politics. Rani Harappa, who personifies the physical representation of the numerous crimes perpetuated by the political regime she is a part of, and transforms them into weavings of textile that take form through Rani's continued production of shawls:

> Rani Harappa, rocking on her verandah, completed in six years of embroidery a total of eighteen shawls, the most exquisite pieces she … black metal trunk full of naphthalene balls and fastened the lock. [Rushdie 190]

Parallel to this, Bowers argues that magic realism is more than a postcolonial celebration of the 'Other'; it is a complex, culturally unexpected mode of representation that depends on context. In Ngugi's novel, this contingency is evident in the satirical depictions of the "Marching to Heaven" project and the Ruler's "Self-Induced Expansion", where global capitalism, personified as Global Bank, collides with local despotism to produce ridiculous and grotesque representations of power. For the Ruler, "magic", as embodied in his claimed pregnancy, is a means of political reinvention that masks authoritarian weakness; for Kamĩtĩ', "magic" is a channel for ecological knowledge and psychological recovery; and for Nyawĩra, "magic" is political performance, rallying the 'Movement for the Voice of the People'. Titus Tajirika suffered "white-ache", an example of Bowers' theory, which makes colonial race-based trauma more prominent by showcasing the ache as a hideous physical desire. By emphasising these different uses of the magical, Bowers's approach shows that in the novel, magical realism is not a universalist strategy but a complex site where multiple narrative logics intersect and conflict with the rationalism of Enlightenment philosophy and the universalism of Western philosophy.

In his 1986 article entitled "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Fredric Jameson asserts that "all third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical…" (69). He makes this claim based on how these texts usually encode the entire collective social totality (e.g., a whole society) as opposed to those of just one character (the character's individual psychology). In the case of *Shame*, Jameson's argument also provides a rationale for why all the novel's magical (or fantastical) elements are political signifiers, such as Sufiya Zinobia transforming into a "white panther." This transformation is not just a reflection of Sufiya's individual pathology; rather, it represents Pakistan's body politic (the physical body of Pakistan as a nation is represented by Sufiya's body). Similarly, the magical events and occurrences throughout the novel represent the ongoing conflict between various modes of production and honour codes in Pakistan, as well as between modern forms of authoritarianism. Ultimately, the narrative leads to an inextricable link between the public and private spheres.

In Jameson's other article titled "On Magic Realism in Film" (1986), he describes that "magic realism depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features" (311). He argues that magical realism is the product of socio-economic emergence in which "precapitalist" structures coexist with and are subverted by modern or emergent forms of capitalist production. He also argues that magic realism is the product of a historical moment in which contrasting temporalities intersect rather than succeeding one another in a linear progression. This argument helps explain the logic of exaggeration in the *Wizard of the Crow,* particularly in Book One, where Machokali, Sikiokuu, and Big Ben Mambo undergo surgical enhancements to their eyes, ears, and tongues in grotesque displays of devotion to the Ruler. This text employs anatomical symbolism to show how power uses its deforming effect on the individual as a means of a personality cult. The party is interrupted by a blood-curdling scream of "Snake! Snake!", which brings about pandemonium. The handing out of plastic snakes by the 'Movement for the Voice of the People' brings about a politics of resistance through the use of symbolic objects to disrupt the state's constructed peace.

According to Jameson's analysis, this is not simply satire but rather an indicative aesthetic registration of uneven development, in which advanced technological forms are attached to antique political structures, resulting in a hybrid social imaginary in which modernization serves to heighten despotism rather than overcome it. The effect is to literalize the figure of the "vampire state," a state that feeds on foreign loans and speculative capital even as it operates through personalized rule and spectacular displays of loyalty, thus staging the tension between global capitalism and authoritarianism.

In *Shame*, Rushdie's politics of representation uses magic realism as a tool of ownership, presenting magical occurrences as public truth to render the state's repression impossible to maintain. The eye-catching presence of Sufiya, in her terms of violence, transformations, and bodily outbursts, serves as a living counter-text to the state's silence, making private shame visible as a national problem. Fundamentally, Rushdie uses representation as a tool to perform political work, where the marvellous exposes, condemns, and even rewrites the state of power in Pakistan.

Meanwhile, in *Wizard of the Crow*, the 'Movement for the Voice of the People' holds a massive assembly before Parliament, reinterpreting the phenomenon of "queuing mania" as a unified political actor. The politics of identity is analysed through the crowd's response to the Wizard of the Crow's challenge. In reaction to the Ruler's call for the identification of Nyawĩra, every individual stands up and declares themselves as, "I am Nyawĩra." As the "politics of representation" peaks in an extreme way, with the emergence of Titus Tajirika. At a genetics clinic in New York City, Tajirika acquires a white right arm and a white left leg. This transition physically allows him to embody the soul divided by the neo-colonial elite. This decision leads him to convince a mob that the Ruler has surrendered his power to him and to allow him to create the "Empire of Tajirika."

The novels explore the competition for epistemic power, with Rushdie representing the marginalized through legitimate sources of knowledge by transforming private displays of spectacle into sources of knowledge, and with Ngũgĩ emphasizing the physical aspects of power through representation, mimicry, and collective action. Both novels employ the grotesque body to lay bare the postcolonial pathology of Sufiya Zinobia's blushing-turned-beast, which embodies

the repressed national shame and violence, as well as the Ruler's ballooning body and the surgical anomalies of his ministers, which expose the inflated, neocolonial elite.

In *Wizard of the Crow*, Kamiti is an educated but unemployed individual whose "magic" is used to reveal hidden truths kept from society. He and Nyawira together embody people-cantered leadership, forging a new vision of life for Africans through an Afrofuturist perspective of postcolonial society. In contrast, Salman Rushdie's *Shame* offers a far more complex history of competing histories. Sufiya Zinobia, one of the protagonists, is the "vessel of memory" for her society; she resists patriarchal and military silence through her richly detailed corporeal presence.

Conclusion

This type of comparative study clearly illustrates that what appears to function as a singular form of "magic realist" style in literary criticism is, in actuality, a cluster of historically and politically located modes that, in their rhetorical consequences, must be appreciated in relation to both epistemology and representational concerns that may be particular to given postcolonial publics. The difference Bowers traces between what she calls the 'marvellous' and those features that Bowers locates as proper to magic(al) realism proper, where the marvellous is incorporated almost routinely rather than as fantasy, gets us far in understanding why, for Rushdie. These bodily interventions seek to repose shame in ways that differ from those in Ngũgĩ's work, given their respective scope, or lack thereof, in relation to the marvellous.

As Carpentier argues, the fantastic is immanent to the historical context rather than simply a literary trope. As such, Rushdie and Ngũgĩ demonstrate the use of the fantastical in different ways to support different political and social ends. In Rushdie's *Shame*, the fantastical is used to critique gender shaming in the private sphere, whether through the performance of shaming itself or through the psychosocial construction that surrounds said shaming. In Ngũgĩ's *Wizard of the Crow*, the fantastical is used to critique the institutionalisation and performance of sovereignty. Because of the taxonomic flattening that has led to the classification of both Rushdie's and Ngũgĩ's works as part of the "magical realism" tradition, it is important to note the significant differences between

the two critiques of governmental dysfunction and private voyeurism that are offered through their respective uses of the fantastic.

In essence, magic realism, or the "marvellous," cannot be treated as a universal genre within the postcolonial context. Rather, it should be understood as a practice that takes different forms depending on whether the writer seeks to expose the personal or collective theatrics of power. The critical reader's task, then, is not simply to classify a text as "marvellous," but to examine how the marvellous functions within it: whether it expresses violence or withholds it, and whether it gives form to particular public imaginaries or keeps them unspoken. In the global context, the marvellous should not be read merely as an expression of violence or its absence.

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