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A Study of Postcolonial Magical Realism in *Red Birds*

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Abstract

The paper analyzes Hanif's *Red Birds* (2018) with the lens of Postcolonial magical realism. Magical realism accounts for the presence of magical characters or events in a realistic setting. As per the postcolonial magical realism, the technique is employed to deconstruct the colonial representation and narrative regarding an idea and to bring forth an unsung, unknown, native narrative to the front. The paper uses narrative analysis technique and investigates the role of setting and the depiction of war-torn region in the novel, *Red Birds* (2018). The paper concludes substantiating the role of magical realism to render a rigid critique and presenting the untold and unseen picture of the colonized as well as that of colonizer's perspective of war and its aftermaths.

Keywords: *Magical realism, Postcolonialism, Post-war, Red Birds, Mohammed Hanif*

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Introduction

An artist is never safe from the influence of his society and time. Whether he is a painter, musician, writer, or a poet, he is prone to observe and sense his society—more than everyone else. Being the eye and ear of a society, has his own style of casting out the images of his world into his art. He may portray it in a realistic shape, may go for his idealistic version of the world, and could call for betterment of his society through satire or any other literary device. Magical realism is one of the ways for propagating one's idea of his society. It is a style of fiction where an artist draws a real picture of the world with adding some magical elements in it. It is also known as Fabulism, Magic Realism or Marvellous Realism. Magical realism is opposed to absolute fantastical or Sci-fi movies, as it uses magical elements to pitch or make a point about a reality and is not revolves around a total magical world. In short, the literature or art rooted in magical realism has both, real as well as fantastical, worlds in it. It started as a response to realism.

The term magical realism was introduced by Franz Roh, a German critic in 1925. He meant to create an art strain that does not come strictly under the domain of realism (McKinney, 2014). Herein, the researcher employs the postcolonial magical realism. Postcolonial writings are considered as a strategy to redeem the once lost identity and defying colonialism ideas that are being imposed. Since it is widely accepted in the domain of Postcolonial studies that colonization was not just limited to physical rule. Rather, it was more of an act of erasing the original native identities of the colonies by changing the colonized subjects' ways of thinking and molding it to accept the colonial regime. Moreover, colonizers did enough to alter the world picture that even today, long after waves of physical colonization being ended, the world is perceived how the colonizers presented their formerly colonized regions (Bowers, 2004).

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There are five basic characteristics of magical realism that are found in almost all of the magical realism works. It is the realistic setting, magical elements, limited information regarding the ongoing magical happenings in the plot, critique on society's politics and unique plot structure (MasterClass, 2019). Considering the characteristic of the critique in magical realism, Mohammed Hanif, a British – Pakistan writer, is known to have a critical pen over the issues dwelling in the modern world. He usually talks about the futility of wars and the social disruption it brought to this world. Moreover, he talks about the monopoly of world powers and political institutions of the countries which entail the miseries of masses. *Red Birds* (2018) by Hanif, is a story of a camp which is to be taken as Post-War country that has been promised to be aided by the same nation who bombed them at first – America. An American Pilot crashes into a desert, nearby to his target. After wandering, with hunger and thirst at him, in the desert for eight days he is rescued by a boy from a camp nearby. The story unfolds and Hanif (2018) uses the postcolonial magical realism to cast a satirical image of American sympathy towards war torn lands.

The research paper analyses *Red Birds* (2018) with the lens of Postcolonial magical realism. It intends to focus on the role of language staged by the author to unveil the untold and unseen image of the post-war regions through the use of magical realism.

2. Literature Review

Postcolonial magical realism intends to break down the dominant perspective and show the other side of the story which has been suppressed long by the dominant powers around the world to reinforce their claims. Abdullah (2020) in ‘Heavy Silence and Horrible Grief: Reconstructing the Past and Securing the Future through Magical Realism in Joseph Skibells’ A Blessing on the Moon’ bring forth the author’s view of the holocaust through the analysis of the magical realism being employed by the author. Abdullah (2020) analyzes in the article that the author of the novel portrays the alternative to the dominant history of the holocaust by using magical realism, ritual and folk belief and Jewish tradition. The article focuses on the importance of storytelling to overcome the trauma of the Holocaust. The article concludes with an emphasis on the significance of magical realism in the act of remembering. Abdullah (2020) convicts that the technique of magical realism enables Skibell (1997) to recall the forgotten ones, to pen down the atrocities over Jews in the Holocaust and to reconstruct a past that has been latent due to imposition of the dominant powers around the world. (Abdullah, 2020)

Many researchers have examined the works on magical realism. Likewise, Losambe (2000) reviews the book *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* by Cooper (1998) and put forward Cooper’s (1998) concept of the technique of magical realism. The book focuses on the writing style of the African writers and the magical realism in general as well. As per Cooper (1998) magical realism is syncretic form of writing style that is “born precisely out of that perilous and fragile embrace between the superstitious beliefs and the ironic distance” (Cooper, 1998). She asserts that magical realism is a bold writing style that critiques the authority and act as a parody of the desires, fantasies, and convictions of the rich and powerful. As per Losambe (2000), Cooper (1998) shows that through the use of the technique like magical realism along with irony, parody, paradox etc. African writers have produced many literary works which presents plenty of unseen images of African socio-political context with denouncing the imperialism and promoting a radical change (Losambe, 2000).

Red Birds (2018) being a recent release, is yet to be explored through the great research scope it offers. Nevertheless, Karim (2020) studies the novel as a satiric account of the American Imperialism strategies. Moreover, the article “Mohammed Hanif’s *Red Birds*: “Anti-colonial textuality” and beyond” put forward the shadow tactics involved behind the capitalist aid with the name USAID for the same regions who are under the constant threat of extinction due to American war policies. Karim (2020) explores *Red Birds* (2018) in terms of radical anticolonial counter textuality, cultural quagmire and the dark humor used by Hanif (2018) to unveil American consistent cultural and military hegemony which causes severe damage to the (Muslim) social and cultural fabric (Karim, 2020).

The literature presented showcases how magical realism is used to render the gap in narratives and unveil the unjust representations but none of them has approached the role of magically realist setting to do so. Almost, all of the literature focus on the text forms used. Karim (2020) is to mention. Nevertheless, the research paper is in accord with the literature reviewed and explores the gap of the role of magical realism language in putting forth the untold and unseen representations of the colonized masses in *Red Birds* (2018).

3. Methodology

The research paper studies the *Red Birds* (2018) under the lens of Postcolonial magical realism. The research is qualitative in nature and conducted through inductive approach in which narrative analysis in textual analysis method of the

selected passages from the novel will be carried out. The researcher opts for Slemon's (1988) theory of magical realism. Slemon (1988) is a Canadian postmodernist critic. He came forward with the three characteristics of postcolonial magical realism based on the discourse theories of Mikhail Bakhtin. He asserts that due to the dual narrative structure of magical realism, it presents the postcolonial context from both of the colonized subjects' and colonizers' perspectives through the narrative and thematic structure. Apart from that, magical realism produces a text which unveils the prevalent gap of narrative and representation in postcolonial context. Moreover, it is a strategy to recede the gaps once found in the cultural representations of the colonized regions by bringing forth the untold and unseen voices of the colonized subjects and unveiling the forcedly sidelined histories from the colonized people's point of view.

4. Discussion

Postcolonial magical realism is believed to present both the colonized and colonizer's perspective through narrative as it produces a text form which unveils and, at once, bridge the gap of narrative representation in a postcolonial context. Slemon (1988) calls it a strategy to present the untold and unseen voices of the colonized subjects and unveiling the forcedly sidelined histories from the colonized people's point of view.

As given, Postcolonial magical realism renders the colonized as well as colonizer's perspective, and *Red Birds* (2018) meets the condition. The novel starts with the crash landing of an American fighter pilot, Major Ellie. As he (apparently) restores his senses, find himself in utter helplessness. The author imbues magical realism as gives, "Roving Angels would be on their way to rescue me, but sometimes Angels can take their time and in order for this rescue to be successful I need to stay alive" (Hanif, 2018). First of all, the mention of "Angels" in a real setting of desert is giving a magical touch to it. Moreover, we later come to know in the novel that the crash landing cost the major his life and it was all what he would have experienced if landed alive. "I need to go tell Momo that there is a ghost under our own roof" (Hanif, 2018). Hence, maintaining the life of a dead signifies another magical element, representing the horrid deaths of at times the soldiers (apparent colonizers), who unknowingly on unknown mission, die. The awe striking depiction of fighter pilots progresses and we get another such instance where magical realism is employed to give us another hint at "Angels". This time it could be infer that the "Angels" may be a rescue team. i.e. "I've blended in now. I can lie down in the sand and wait for the Angels to come and take me away in a helicopter" (Hanif, 2018).

Bowers (2004) finds that altering the geographical, cultural and economical, landscape of the colonies have been the paramount interest of the colonizers. Likewise, in *Red Birds* (2018) we witness the same through the narrative of Momo who states the once geography of his region, now distorted by the American bombings, i.e.

"There was a waterfall here, yes a proper waterfall, it had shrunk to three feet and the fall was only basketball-hoop high. Bro Ali and I used to bathe under it when I was a child. And that was not a very long time ago. Some people're gonna say that if I was only a child back then how would I know?"

How can there be a waterfall in the middle of the desert, they're gonna ask. And I'm gonna say you know nothing about this place, my place." (Hanif, 2018)

Hanif (2018) uses magical realism as he suggests a waterfall amidst a desert to hint at the eradication of picturesque landscapes in colonies because of the tyrannical imperial measures. The statement "you know nothing about this place, my place." Hanif (2018) denotes the Imperial attitude who never got to learn the native softly rather just focused on conquering and altering the colonized landscapes as per the Imperial wish. It happens the similar in *Red Birds* (2018) as there exists now a "Hanger" rather than a waterfall. Just like Major Ellie, Momo is also already dead, killed by the soldiers on enquiring about his brother Ali, i.e., "a very short rattle from the gun and the boy had two large holes in his face. He stumbled before falling, a bit surprised at this sudden turn of events". Hanif (2018), providing another magical realist element to the novel.

Hanif (2018) keeps including magical realism elements to propagate the dead's families perception about the losses they encounter due to the Imperial designs of America. Ali's death is given again with the suggestions of "Angel" and "Wings" translating him to something more than a human – magical creature, i.e.

"We woke one morning and instead of his school uniform he put on black overalls, with a golden wing on his chest. It seemed as if he had gone to sleep a normal big brother – who slaps the older boy who fingers you in the street and then comes home and slaps you for having got into trouble in the first place – but woken up with wings. As if the night had turned him into an angel." (Hanif, 2018)

As mentioned earlier, *Red Birds* (2018) mentions repeatedly of creatures other than humans. Likewise, Mutt, the dog, envisages a US Army convoy. Though, it appears apearntely that it is just a normal convoy but in real it is the dead. It is the group of all the war (heroes) that are forgotten to be documented and never would be done so, i.e.

“A ghost army is coming together for a reunion. Momo is never going to believe it. He is a man of science. Even if ghosts come brandishing cheque books, Momo is not going to believe it. The only way he would believe this is to come and see this for himself. It’s just like the old days but much colder. The gates of the Hangar are open, the flood lights have been turned on, there are no aeroplanes but the windsock is fluttering, the giant machines in the Hangar are squeaking and whirling.

Why have they come back? Have they brought our bro back? Suddenly I remember. My fried brains might be slow but they can do the job. I know the person who doesn’t have a smell. I need to go tell Momo that there is a ghost under our own roof.” (Hanif, 2018)

The given instances from the novel signifies the magical realism elements woven by the author. The term like “ghosts” and the activities attributed to them like army and aeroplanes certainly provide an insight into Hanif’s (2018) portrayal of the war scenarios where hundreds of soldiers wipe the dust of war and never return. Hanif does not stop giving us the representations of colonized and colonizers through the use of magical realism. Towards the end, where we learn that almost all the characters were dead and we just had their “ghosts” wandering and narrating all the chaotic instances to highlight the war torn morbid scenarios. Though dead, but as per *Red Birds* (2018) the dead of wars longs for salvation. Here, salvation could mean documentation and commemoration. All of the dead and their salvation are provided again with elements of magical realism, i.e.

“My Jeep Cherokee gets airborne. There is a giant metal jaw that descends from above and is clutching it now, the metal jaw is connected to heavy chains, and as I look up, midway between the Hangar’s ceiling and my sorry airborne ass is a giant crane and Ellie, sitting in it, is working its metal jaw from above and is pulling me towards him, up, up, up. The jeep is swaying dangerously in the air. Below me all I can see are clouds of red dust. I catch a glimpse of Mutt, hiding in the crane box, yelping madly at a pair of pale feet.

I can expect anything from my best mate, stupidity, greed, definitely greed, all kinds of perversion, but I never thought he had a treacherous bone in his body. After this is over I am gonna teach him a lesson. I am gonna teach him how to be loyal.

But now, suspended in mid-air, I am gonna be learning a lesson or two.

I am going up, up, up. I pass Ellie, he is grinning like a benevolent. ghoulish and when I pass by him he waves at me as if saying hullo.

On second thoughts he is probably saying goodbye. (Hanif, 2018)

Eventually, we learn to see the salvation of all the dead, the colonized and the soldiers (colonizers) in terms of magical realism. For instance, the jeep getting airborne and swaying are truly some magical instances. What remain is the leftover chaos of the war waged over the region.

5. Conclusion

Magical realism accounts for the realistic setting, magical elements, limited information regarding the magical happenings with a stern critique on society’s politics having a unique plot structure. When incorporated to the domain of Postcolonial literature, it acts as bridging the prevalent representation gap in terms of social and cultural structure of the colonized as well as the colonizers. Hanif (2018) provides ample amount of Postcolonial magical elements in *Red Birds* (2018). We have a war struck desert as the real setting, “angels”, “ghosts” “airborne jeep” as the magical elements and we never get comprehensive information even about the characters whether they are alive or dead, till the very end, exactly. Moreover, Hanif (2018) casts a stern critique on the US army (Imperial) endeavors, particularly over the Muslim world. The novel presents the brutal airstrikes which cost, everything, to the third world masses. US army, as per the novel, hires locals like Ali to point them the life in dry terrains in return of money and support to the family. It sheds light at the internal turmoil amongst the colonized as an aftermath of the War. In addition to the discussed elements, the novel comes with a strange plot that does not conform to the orthodox plot constructions. Conclusively, the language staged by Hanif in *Red Birds* (2018) plays an emphatic role while undergoing the magical realism, casting a rigid critique and presenting the untold and unseen picture of the colonized as well as that of colonizers’ perspective of war and its aftermaths.

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