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### Magic Realism in African Literature: A Study on Selected Works of Ben Okri and Nadine Gordimer

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#### Abstract

This article examines the evolution of magical realism as a narrative style used by African writers throughout the transition period, and how it became increasingly suited to African literary sensibilities at the time. At the same time, magical realism relies heavily on African oral traditions, serving as a site of convergence for black and white writing under apartheid, as well as exemplifying the synthesis of Eurocentric Western logic and African tradition. This article discusses the possible origins of the proliferation of African texts embracing this narrative mode in the immediate aftermath of apartheid's demise, as well as the possible reasons for the gradual abandonment of magical realist narrative strategy in the post-millennial era, while discussing magic realism in relation to Ben Okri's and Nadine Gordimer's post-apartheid novels. As a consequence of the short cohabitation of the two literary forms in African literary history, African magical realism works will be located at the intersection of celebration and disillusionment literature.

**Keywords:** Magic Realism, Afrikaans, Disillusionment, Apartheid, Postcolonialism

### **Introduction**

Despite the fact that Afrikaans had evolved enough from its parent Dutch by about 1750 to be deemed a separate language, the first Afrikaans writings were not produced for another century. In 1875, a group of politically aware individuals founded the Association of True Afrikaners, which went on to produce the first Afrikaans newspaper, magazine, and literary writings. S. J. du Toit, a Dutch Reformed preacher and prolific author, was the driving force behind the so-called First Afrikaans Language Movement. The First Language Movement's works were propagandistic, seeking to dispel prejudice towards the new language and demonstrate that it might be a useful method of communication.

A significant corpus of post-colonial writings has been characterised by a strong interest in history and a desire to revisit and critically re-examine the past. Similarly, after the fall of apartheid, it became essential to renegotiate historic accounts of African literature, especially during the political transition from apartheid to a democratic administration that lasted throughout the 1990s. The wish to reassess the past and its implications for contemporaries in a society in which identities were long assigned and imposed and margins systematically suppressed in pre-colonial, colonial and apartheid times proved to be indispensable for the processes of reconciliation and rebuilding identities caused by apartheid's demises. Nonetheless, African authors as a whole have never consistently attempted to critically interrogate history. When thinking about the evolution of South African literature prior to the end of apartheid,

Magical realism and postcolonialism have gone hand in hand on the African continent, especially in West and South Africa. Other African writers such as Ben Okri and Nadine Gordimer have drawn inspiration from Yoruba myths and beliefs in West Africa. With their books and short tales, Ben Okri and Nadine Gordimer have established worldwide reputations. Gordimer's debut book, *The Lying Days*, had an international effect (1953). She writes astringently and without sentimentality, her skill arguably at its finest in such short-story collections as *Not for Publication*, a careful observer of the physical world and of subtleties in human interactions (1965). Gordimer was the first South African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991.

### **Ben Okri**

In addition to local inspiration and themes such as colonialism, religion and internationalism, western African magic realism frequently includes local components to produce cross-cultural literature that represents many Western Africans' contemporary situation. For example, the writings of 'African writers that adhere to this animism very often combine spirits, ancestors and talking animals, adapted folk and newly made young people, to transmit their feelings, aesthetics and politics' (1998:40). She thinks these stories are still prevalent because of the superficial influence of colonialism on West African indigenous culture (Cooper 1998:40). As a consequence, while Okri has lived much of his life in London as a British Nigerian, his book *The Famished Road* ([1991], 1992) is presented mostly from a Western African perspective.

Magic and reality are linked in the style of summing and real in this type of story is imbued with the Supernatural. *The Famished Road* utilised the supernatural in an apparently

contradictory manner to improve the natural world. The magic code raises the reality code. However, magically realistic texts cannot be confined to a certain technique of subversion that is a major historical and aesthetic use of the style. For this hermeneutical particularity, the restriction of the mode by *Famished Road* on specific aesthetic arrangements of social and political matters could not make sense, firstly, of the essential adoption of this story by its protagonists of the human reality and domain, and hence the code of realism, and secondly, of its use of realism to confirm humanism, which is a framework closely connected with

As these three figures, Azaro, the Abiku people of Nigeria, and the King of the Unborn are alternatively resident in the spirit and the earth. On the other hand, the photographer and his father are already men of age and stature. It is essential to remember that this is not a traditional tale of coming-of-age, but a magical realism variant. The common thread that passes between these characters and the focus of this chapter is how they become a common method of being and belonging to the world, so that the maturing theme of *The Famished road* covers its strategy of belonging.

First, narrative magic and realism change the hierarchy of values, taking control of the natural world by the supernatural and making it a centre of value of the human sphere or scope. This is shown later in the Duel between Himmel and Earth when it turns upside-down. Secondly, transcendental values, such as invincibility, are contained inside the mortal world in accordance with the preceding argument. Third, story magic works for people and their connections as a trigger. This is portrayed as the development of Dad's character involves supernatural growth, while in the fourth type narrative magic operates in contradiction to the final reality. The heroes must reject to pursue nasty supernatural entities who contradict their inherent ties and therefore their growth.

The main subject of *The Famished Road* is maturing. Azaro, still a spirit at this stage, shows that the King has different formations, including men and women, in the spiritual world which has been called "the land of beginnings," where Abiku Spirits and unborn, or spirit children, are governed by the King of the unborn. However, other Abikus and Azaro have vows to return from life at the earliest opportunity and thus never become men, while the reader is given the contrary example of their King.

He had been born many times and was a legend across the universe. [...] It didn't matter what conditions he was born into. He had always lived amazing lives [...] He created extraordinary accomplishments from every existence, whether he was a man or a woman. If there's one thing that runs through all of his lives, one thing that defines his brilliance, it's the passion of transforming love into greater realities. (3)

Okri offers traditional Abiku characters a destination in *The Famished Road* and extends the Abiku 'condition' to a universal level beyond Western Africa. It pertains to the global condition, which includes a broad variety of places, people and events. In doing so, it suggests that destiny occurs often in human life. Okri offers a gradual understanding of the future through deconstruction of the past. This gradual interpretation does not reject the past, but tries to transcend it. We may argue that Okri thinks that history is a natural step not just to the present but also to the future. Okri accomplishes this by "decoding [the] traditional [Abiku] image by following Azaro's choice to choose life over death." Azaro ends the awful

cycle of birth and rebirth, which has brought so much misery to his family and instead strives to meet his community's social duty" (165-66).

Due to the unconsciousness of Dad, magic exhales and reflects the usage of magic as a proponent of human existence by the story. This magic enables the body of Dad to grow and gives him more human power to fight for noble causes. Dad is also seeking assistance from the benign forces of the spirit world in the human realm. Dad doesn't rely on superior ability to bring about planetary transformation.

Quayson says that the tale tries to resist any easy conclusion that can be made from the study of any one interweaving method, since it connects "the esoteric with the real."

According to Quayson, Okri combines esoteric with real in at least four different ways:

1. The spirit realm exists in the space between actual occurrences.
2. The realms of reality and spirit are clearly separated.
3. The lines between reality and esoteric realms are blurred
4. The story is directed toward both levels at the same time, although it is primarily focused on the esoteric plane.

On the other hand, the realistic aspect of style in *The Famished Road* one could examine. Okri portrays this Nigerian village's horrific historical and political reality facing daily physical hunger and neocolonial political rule. In Okri's work the mystical aspects represent a supernatural African worldview. We can clearly see how Okri has in many ways interwoven the threads of magic and reality in this tale, enabling us to grasp how they interact on the narrative web. Okri developed a society in which some ancient ideas about the modern nation state are connected by depicting the country as Abiku in *The Famished Road*. Okri uses magical realism in *The Famished Road* to construct an affiliation strategy.

Madame Koto's bar is a single place on the narrative map of *Famished Road* where the supernatural, the political and the natural spheres clash most. As a consequence, the spiritual and political metaphysical synthesis is revealed at this moment. This location of Mme Koto's bar and Madame Koto's renowned palm wine and pepper soup are an exclusive meeting place for party members. In addition, the powerful mysticism of Madame Koto makes her establishment a favourite haunt for weird spirits.

In the collection of magical realism, *Famished Road* is significant from various aspects, including types of narration, cultural issues and techniques. The tale utilises magic to construct a belonging strategy that prioritises humanistic ideals, rather than utilising indigenous traditions to undermined Western hegemonic systems.

### **Nadine Gordimer**

As a realistic writer, Nadine Gordimer was acclaimed even as a socialist, but reading her short novels and stories, you cannot not be struck by the presence of the uncanny as if you are lurking in the background. Another element of the writer's skill is persistence, singularity, and even odd situations or events, demonstrating that she can use all the tools available to accomplish her objective. Gordimer always claimed that as a young 15-year-old she started to write in a mining town and that the circumstances took her instead of the opposite. She was a South African writer, but first and foremost, she was a writer. In the preface to her selected stories, released in 1975, she focuses on her own concept of

commitment and also addresses the challenge of identifying the illusive shape of the short story compared to the novel:

So, in a sense, a writer is "chosen" by his topic - his subject being the consciousness of his own era. To me, the foundation of commitment is how he deals with this, even though "commitment" is commonly viewed as the opposite process: a writer's choice of subject in accordance with the rationalisation of his own ideological and/or political ideas.

My period and place was Africa in the twentieth century. The short story was the first form in which I wrote after emerging from it, engaged in it. [...]

A short narrative is a concept that the writer can "hold" in his imagination at one time, fully formed. [...] In the imaginative sense, a short narrative occurs. To write one is to convey the life-giving drop – sweat, tear, sperm, saliva – that will spread an intensity on the paper; burn a hole in it – from a scenario in the outer or interior world.. (*Selected Stories* 14-5, emphasis in original)

The Gordimer's distinctive "scenario" approach is very sensual and palpable, as she puts it, whether in the inner or the outside world, alluding to sweat, tears, semen, and saliva as well as the imaginative function. I am concentrating on the presence of what she calls "fantasy" bordering on the uncanny in her short stories and using the visual and recurring referencing to the mysterious unknown/oppressive presence of the all-embracing "dark continent" and its people who are claiming their duty – for a writer considered realist and committed – Although her stories are based on a hard reality, occasionally they turn into fairytale or sad fairy tales. She wrote for *Salmagundi*, *Once Upon a Time*, a story of Christmas that takes the canonical shape of the fairytale, but which ends up being very cruel, with the death of the little boy maimed by the many defenders built by his parents, egotten by "the old witch" of his grandma, to protect them from outside invaders.

A visual understanding of the short story *The Flash of Fireflies* According to Gordimer, the short tale is the ideal way to write about a certain time that has an effect near to a situation. It is comparable to poetry and may be read "in one place" (Poe), a benefit for a country under siege for a long time – from the 1960s to the 1990s – because it had been simpler to concentrate on a brief text than on a book's longer shape.

Again, in her essay "The Flash of Fireflies" Gordimer has to compare the book with the short story genres. She points out in her relationship the short story's ability to capture the ultimate reality at a time when [...] we come closer to the mystery of life or lose ourselves in a wild wilderness of mirrors as the nature of that reality is more fully grasped or more fiercely obscured by scientific discoveries and the spread of the media. (179)

The fact that she wrote this in 1968 shows that she foresees some fifty years later what would rule our society: the use of communication technology to enhance, transpose or hide reality in the manner in which the printed word could not. It may appear very thrilling at a time when a book can be read from a computer screen like a picture. It is notable that she has used a strong synaesthesia that blends visual with audio and her need on "a roaring mirror hall" to portray a feeling of loss. His capacity to think in images will be one of Gordimer's creative talents.

It stresses the conflict between the nature of the reality recorded by fiction when scientific advances and communication technology may make it "more fully understood" or "crazily concealed." She is thus obliged to take into account the complex connection between fiction, imagination and what she calls "the ultimate truth." She then utilises yet another extremely visual metaphor to convey her concept, showing her inclination towards visual thinking. She maintains that imagination is just a "perspective shift" towards reality and rationality. "Flashes of terrifying discoveries and sleepy apathy alternate":

The line between fantasy and the so-called rational is becoming increasingly wavy in human perception, and writers are becoming increasingly aware of it. Fantasy is commonly understood to be nothing more than a shift in viewpoint; to put it another way, the rational is simply another, more visible kind of imagination. Writers employ a less visible imagination as a lens through which to view ultimate reality. This dream, however, morphs, mixes, appears, and fades like a pattern seen through the bottom of a glass. It is accurate while looking down through the glass; nevertheless, the same view does not continually modify what one sees during one's whole consciousness. Fantasy in the hands of short-story authors is far more powerful than fantasy in the hands of novelists since it only needs to stay true for the brief duration of the scene it controls. The short story is a disjointed and restless form, a hit-or-miss proposition, which may be why it matches modern awareness, which appears to be best portrayed by flashes of terrifying insight interspersed by near-hypnotic periods of lethargy. (My emphasis in "Fireflies" 180-1)

Her simile is comparable to the delicate kaleidoscopic picture that she might ascribe to her writing and the way she makes her multicolour, shifting perspective of society so many pieces of geometrical glass 'seen from the bottom of a glass.' When reality (that of coloured glass and mirrors) is twisted by a bigger lens or a microscope, the results are a pattern and image comparable to that produced by imagination.

In this piece, she extends her concept of the short storey as a brief, brilliant moment, which she calls "firefly's flash," a reference to one of her favourite insect images. She explains "the nature of human life, which means that touch is more like a flash of firefly, inside and outside, right now, there, in the dark" and adds, "Short Story authors perceive the light of the flash; theirs is the art of something that can be definite - the current instant" (emphasis added, 180).

The short storey gives us short opinions on specific occurrences, generating an astonishing image of a fleeting reality that is temporarily anchored in the current event and not more. The creative notion of "flash of the fireflies" and the use of punctuation, as we will see later, recall one of Woolf's astonishing short storey published in *The Searchlight*, *Blitz* (269-72). The repeated use of three points in this storey to denote the text reflects the rotating move of the searchlight as seen by the characters in a tower.

Gordimer's fundamental idea of a firefly explosion, which represents his aesthetic and ethical approach, reappears with little changes in a short storey. The white terrorist, released in 1984, is stopped in a barricade as a train passes by. He is in the car with the estate agent who has loaned him and his wife the dilapidated farmhouse. After a short time of concern, he

feels secure in offering a social gesture of good will. The narrator contrasts the light projected by the lit-up train windows into the veld with the light thrown in the veld by Gordimer's essay:

On one of Charles' return trips, at the crossing level, he came up behind Naas Klopper and Mrs. Naas in the Mercedes. When the veld flashes behind him, a train, like a camera, shuts through, opens and shuts with every rolling stock segment... The visual explosion energised Charles. With a wave and a grin, he welcomed the estate agent and his wife. (139)

This is a key to her short tale, within the story, which is intended as a sequence of brief images and significant events.

This stunning picture will enable me to demonstrate that the continuous but subtle presence of the visual in her work is one of the methods she employs to communicate the sometimes elusive "ultimate truth." It may appear directly, as in "Jump" and "Amnesty"), or indirectly, as in "Livingstone's Companions," or as a powerful symbolical image bordering on the allegorical, the horrific, and the macabre (*Six Feet of the Country*, *The Conservationist*).

Images showing the repressed are shown in a number of Gordimer's short stories, which allude to severe harm and unethical actions. In land dispossession, the short stories and portions of the novels have a strong picture: This is what I will call the "revival of bodies." Gordimer once answered a question about the Beloved Nation of Alan Paton by saying that whites have no rights to the country and that the real inheritors are blacks, affirming that through *parónomasia* (there/theirs):

I believe that whites always have to establish their claim to the property since it is based on a piece of paper - a deed of sale, as Mehring's mistress reminds. What is a document of sale when people have conquered a nation through conquest first? In terms of morality, tenure is a fascinating notion. What exactly is tenure, now that you think about it? What does it mean to have "legal" tenure? The land is taken for granted by black people; it is just there. It's theirs, despite the fact that they've been conquered; they've always been there. They aren't obligated to say things like, "Well, I adore this place because it is lovely, because it is this, that, and the other." (See "Conversation" on page 6)

The dead return to take property is first portrayed in Gordimer's 1953 *Six Feet of the Country* storey.

The storey or, rather, the book, *Something Out There*, also tackles the topic of a suppressed return to the life and consciousness of white people. The term itself describes the unrecognised, but very hideous figure that many people saw but have evaded identity: a man of colour? He's an ape? Is it a baboon? Crimes like fruit robbery, venison and other easily available food, rummaging in trash cans, climbing trees, killing of pets and frightening employees are nevertheless perpetrated, leading to a choir of voices in the suburb and media. This is ranging from well-off and luxury neighbourhoods to poor regions and eventually white suburbia of the working class. The police on John Vorster Square are powerless (where torture was used to obtain confessions). This storey theme develops simultaneously with

another: two white people and two black people are hiding secretly "out there" in a ruinous farmhouse preparing to destroy the local power station. The society is therefore facing two sets of threats, and when the sabotage takes its power away, the imminent threat from the animals goes into the background and... from the headlines. The beast is ultimately recognised for what it is and its ugly dimension is gone. It was caught and will be murdered.

The narrator links the various historic strands of the formation of the country and its inhabitants, whether natives or immigrants, to the end of the storey. As Dr. Grahame Fraser-Smith remembers, "in the eye of the hominids on a golf courses," the dominance of Dr. Grahame Fraser-Smith may be traced back to a common parent. Many actors in the tale and the ape and a copy of a rare Indian monument all come together, much as the land and its deep mines, in which two terrorists are hiding while preparing to take part in the final stage of the attack. However, the well-known narrator returns his actual rights to the real proprietors of the mine:

The work of Eddie and Vusi, which Charles described as a part of the turn of the 19th century, is much older. It goes back to the existence of human beings, who are anthropological, archaeological and the hands that have form of the items or which have burned the charcoal, which may be submitted to carbon testing. Nobody knows that with the brief occupation of Vusi and Eddie, and with the terrible instruments that were everything they had to work with, a circle had been closed, because centuries before the 1890's gold rush prospectors had been measured, there was an old mining work here in such units and metals precious to man were found, dug and melted, by themselves, by black men. (There's something out 203)

The "hominid descent" who returned to haunt the suburbs claimed that they had been theirs for the first time, and ancient mines offered a cache and a cradle for their descendants who were attempting to claim their heritage.

It should be noted that Gordimer symbolises animals here: baboon is one example, but we also find insects, such as the Termitary, in which termites consume and threaten to collapse a household of the white family, such as the "flames of fireflies" or another early storey. The able men are then called to the house, creating a total chaos. The dark woman is waiting for her militant husband to see the clouds eat away in the sky in Amnesty, the final storey of the Jump. She longs for her land and the day she may call it her home.

### **Conclusion**

The dual 20th-century trends of urbanisation and apartheid had a significant impact on the psychological composition of English- and Afrikaans-speaking Europeans, as well as indigenous Africans, and therefore on their literary expression. The moral and aesthetic difficulties posed by Africa's circumstances sparked writing to some extent, although the country's concern with "race" issues may have hampered the development of a genuine national literature. As a result, African magical realism would be situated at the crossroads of celebration and disillusionment literature, arising from the brief cohabitation of the two literary movements in African literary history.

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