CONSTRUCTING *SAMENESS* IN MAGICAL REALISM: MILAN KUNDERA'S *TESTAMENTS BETRAYED*

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Abstract

This paper briefly analyses some of the images projected onto literature, following perception of the relationships between artists, writers and cultures, tradition according to variables in interpretation. It's an attempt to understand the views on the way literature reflects how people live and how we have become who we are in works of magical realism.

Keywords: **essay, culture, literature, magical realism, history of the novel, betrayal.**

Introduction

Sameness and difference are broadly seen as fundamental characteristics of Western culture and society. Going as far back as the Greeks, we identify the notion that any *thing* either is or is not, i.e., it exists or does not exist. Later, Aristotle applied the notion of being or not being as something being or not being part of a category, which then lead to particularizations of complexities in the construction of classifications. It is not our intention to list the European and non-European traditions where the myth of sameness has been long debated. We propose that this notion be applied to a selection of writings in English that display features that are first and foremost universally human before pertaining to social or cultural constructs and ideologies of Eastern or Western realms.

Magical realism in literature seems to have started out as an almost exclusively Latin American phenomenon on account of the extraordinary history and culture that was characteristic of the territories in question. When reality and fantasy come together material realities apparently fade away as facts and occurrences are tackled in order to redress cultural domination by revaluing the non-Western thought systems as the dominant world view. In recent years magical realism has been perceived as a widespread mode of expression, which rejects the apparent incoherence between generic literary devices of different backgrounds. This literary genre has started to function as an attempt through which communities try to make sense of the world,of the human experience of the world. Geographically acknowledged modes of thinking have been escaping from their confinement and texts can no longer be said to neatly divide cultures into distinctively separate parts of a fundamentally similar psychological perspective.

Narrative, magical as well as metaphorical thinking modes influence people's perceptions in a similar way to how objective reality does. This is how metaphors, beliefs and everything that has to do with dreams and magic are as real as objects we come

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across every day. All of the aforementioned shape our reactions, our behaviour. We construct the world in ways that will not be absolute but rather transitory and magical realist texts will observe the strategies we employ in order to make sense of what goes on. Different worlds deconstruct claims of reality pertaining only to factual information and build on the levels of reality that are accesible through the use of metafictional strategies that cast doubt and produce hesitation in any human mind.

Fiction focus

Magical realist authors focus their writing on something that cannot be explained according to the laws of the universe as we know them. Details and realistic descriptions create a fictional world where readers often hesitate between contradictory understandings of the unfolding events, leading to doubts. In Mark Salzman's *Lying Awake*, the story of a Carmelite nun who learns that her visions of God's radiance may have been caused by temporal-lobe seizures, a removable small tumor poses an interesting question about the true nature of faith. After dedicating almost 30 years to her faith with little happiness, and a lot of doubt to her calling as a nun, her electrifying visions had given her support and encouragement. By making the decision to have the tumor removed, and risk losing her visions which had also led to her write inspiring poetry, she learns how to evolve through her own stubbornness in facing the real world outside.

Fact and fiction often dwell together, as do the living and the dead, genies, spirits and so we are invited to experience the closeness of two realms, two worlds. Fluid boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead are traced only to be crossed, raising questions such as the one asked by Mahfouz's Husniya: "Did a genie really bring you down or was it a dog's bite that destroyed you?" (1995:32). Distinctions between fact and fiction become dialogues of the masks, as Okri writes: "In a language that human beings cannot hear the masks spoke to one another in their angular silence" (2011:71). Thus, magical realism becomes the continuum where sets of mathematical elements are found to be linked by a third, imperceptible variable that defines a series or a whole, no part of which can be said to be perceptibly different from the other parts. Time, space and identity intertwine and build stories running in parallel while portraying universal human passions in narratives that appear to be written for children, yet speak about such major themes as: the importance of stories in a person's life, and what can be learned from them, as Shafak's character, Shams Tabrizi, points out: 'we learn by reading but understand with love'; the balance between silence and speech, as illustrated by Rushdie's Gup and Chup, two sides of a whole in *Haroun and the sea of stories* and the beauty of darkness in *Shalimar the Clown's* characters trapped in symbols and metaphors, sometimes angry, sometimes clownish in a story that seems to be full of clichés. The narrative appears as fresh, childlike, even primitive. Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, accepted without any questioning or reflection.

Metamorphoses are relatively common. Kafka's Gregor Samsa turns into an insect, an occurrence which is neither questioned nor does it raise any concern over the

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condition, thus magnifying a small truth to huge proportions. Prior to the transformation the main character's life was much the same as that of a beetle, the importance of the body newly acquired merely brings an acknowledgement of a state of affairs lasting for quite some time. Another more recent example would be the numerous transformations of Lord Voldemort in J.K. Rawling's series, which arguably does not fit the genre of magic realism, as it is broadly seen as a work of fantasy. An antibureaucratic position helps in the use of magic against the established social order. *Death at intervals* depicts an unusual scenario setting in motion many departments and clerks working towards finding a solution to the threat expressed in the anonymous letter that disturbed the apparent peace of a community. Death has resigned, an event which changes the lives of bishops, philosophers, insurance agents alike, which sends the reader on a journey of imaginative challenges that are delightful to encounter. The reader may experience a particular kind of linguistic magic, which runs through magical realism, where metafictional dimensions are common, as certain works provide commentaries on themselves. Repetitions frequently create a magic of references to ancient systems of belief. Orhan Pamuk's *White Castle* is a brilliant example of narrative technique, a historical metafiction - a fine allegory which follows an aesthetical artistic line. Latife Tekin's *Dear Shameless Death* tackles political realities, while maintaining a highly imaginative, fairy-tale-like style.

Kundera's definition of a writer is: "A person who writes books is either all (a single universe for himself and everyone else) or nothing. And since all will never be given to anyone, every one of us who writes is nothing..." More than a fine and keen observation of the writer's destiny, this dichotomy appears not to ever come to terms with the broad knowledge Kundera himself proves to have about the history of the novel and the ways in which literature influences and is influenced by other cultural factors. This bold statement appears to functions as a daring challenge to fellow writers and readers alike, in an attempt to shape an understanding of art and artists. According to Nietzsche's injunction we should neither "corrupt the actual way our thoughts come to us" nor, "turn one's ideas into a system". In the evolution path of the novel from Rabelais to Kafka many parallels between literature, music and the arts have been drawn giving examples such as Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Chopin, Thomas Mann, Bach and Andre Breton. Legacies are sometimes betrayed such as Kundera's Testaments Betrayed's title hints at such deeds as conductor Ernest Ansermet's rejection of the music of Igor Stravinsky; the so-called support for Salman Rushdie by intellectuals who misconstrued his Satanic Verses as an attack on religious faith; and Hemingway biographer Jeffrey Meyers's interpretations, which confuse Hemingway's life with his fiction. Another alleged betrayal involves Max Brod, Kafka's friend, accused of promoting an image of Kafka as a martyr. Kundera argues that, because of Brod, Kafka's works tend to be read either as autobiographical or as allegories instead of as a part of the surrounding world transformed by a powerful imagination.

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Nostalgia and shame

Experience and cultural heritage seem to shape important parts of novelistic truths. The world of the arts and the world of the common people are populated by humans, with all their characteristic features. Thus, the history of the novel becomes part of the history of the people who write them, as well as of the social circumstances they belong to. A key feature of contemporary fiction is then the nostalgia felt for things of the past. "The novelist in our time who is nostalgic for the art of the old masters of the novel cannot retie the tie where it was cut; he cannot leap over the enormous experience of the nineteenth century; if he wants to connect with the easy-going freedom of Rabelais or Sterne, he must reconcile with the requirements of composition" (Kundera 1993:18).

Music, literature and culture

Books written by Kundera include references to the earliest fragments of literature, preceeding novels in the more recent form. *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being* makes reference to one of the themes favoured by makers of literature: "He suddenly recalled from Plato's Symposium: People were hermaphrodites until God split then in two, and now all the halves wander the world over seeking one another. Love is the longing for the half of ourselves we have lost" (Kundera, 1984). Beyond the love and devotion Kundera himself shows for his art, we find an inquisitive and critical eye, sometimes bordering on irony, which is present in his essay in nine parts. Therefore, Kundera's cynical image of French artists is illustrated in the paradox: "if the novel is successful, it must necessarily be wiser than its author. This is why many excellent French intellectuals write mediocre novels. They are always more intelligent than their books". Thus, it comes as no surprise that in *Testaments Betrayed,* Kundera's perspective on the novel is built by questioning, rather then affirming facts. "The history of European music covers about a thousand years (if I take as its beginnings the first experiments in primitive polyphony). The history of the European novel (if I take as its start the works of Rabelais and Cervantes) covers about four centuries" (Kundera 1993:57). On the other hand, while differences in historical perception may exist, the two forms of manifestation of art – music and literature intertwine.

Irony

War and peace is one of the key books mentioned by Kundera while discussing the history of the novel and such features as paradox and irony. Looking back, novels of the past seem simple and well-built into compositions that clearly depict circumstances and character. "Man proceeds in the frog. But when he looks back to judge people of the past, he sees no fog on their path" (Kundera 1993:238). The opus of novel writing seems to remain somewhere in our past, with slim chances of revival in the present, which sounds a bit ironic and out of place. On the other hand, this view might be balanced by Kundera's statement: "if high culture is coming to an end, it is also the end of you and

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your paradoxical ideas, because paradox as such belongs to high culture and not to childish prattle". (http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6343.Milan_Kundera)

Conclusion

Testaments Betrayed will lead one to fresh readings of writers such as Rabelais, Cervantes, Tolstoy, Mann, Hemingway, Faulkner, Musil, Kafka and Salman Rushdie. Many of his points may appear provocative: the defense of the right of artists to explore the horrifying or profane, as Stravinsky does in *Le Sacre du Printemps* or as Rushdie does in *The Satanic Verses*. He names a number of fine artists of the century: Celine, Marinetti, Pound, Brecht, and others. Kundera's extensive essay on the times we live in demonstrates a broad artistic vision, a wealth of ideas about the importance of culture in the contemporary world and the need to focus on both the form and means of artistic expression in novels and the arts. Moreover, as Kundera puts it, fiction and the novel can serve as a guardian of the values of our times.

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