Theorizing Magical Realism: An Historiographic Perspective

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers the choice of postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis in the study of magical realism in Nigerian literature. It is aimed at exploring of the possible approaches to theorizing magical realism in literature. The paper also examines these possible approaches to theorizing magical realism and explains why the researcher has chosen postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis as the most suitable approach to studying magical realism in Nigerian literature. The findings reveal that these theories open up the selected texts, to some useful components which give the researcher the wherewithal to explore some interpretations of magical realism in literature.

Keywords: Magical Realism, Postmodernism, postcolonism, psychoanalysis, interdisciplinarity.

INTRODUCTION
Magical Realism and Postmodernism have enjoyed a cordial relationship in literary studies, no doubt about that. This study reveals that postmodernism is an insufficient approach to theorizing magic realist novels such as Amos Tutuola’s The Palmwine Drinkard, My Life in the Bush of Ghost, Ben Okri’s The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment, Infinite Riches, and Biyi Bandele’s The Man Who Came in From The Back of Beyond, The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams and The Street. The reason for this insufficiency is the basis for this paper.

It is important to view briefly the role of postmodernism in literary studies. It must be stated that Hutcheon’s famous assertion about postmodernism being politically ambivalent has influenced the preference in this study for the postcolonial and psychoanalytic theories. Hutcheon’s exposition about the politics of postmodernism can convince the reader that political ambivalence is not present in these magic realist novels but all the narrators take sides with the less privileged “other” of postcolonial discourse. Lodge clarifies the notion that:

Postmodernism by contrast, (to modernism) commits the apocalyptic error of believing that the discrediting of this particular representational epistemology is the death of truth itself, just as it sometimes mistakes the disintegration of certain traditional ideologies of the subject for the subject’s final disappearance. In both cases the obituaries are greatly exaggerated (395).

The fictionalization of historical and religious narratives is possible within the postmodernist discourse. This reflexivity is evident in Okri’s novels where the creation is retold through the displacing of hitherto accepted and sacred narratives, producing a hybridized narrative through the magical realism. A comparison of Tutuola, Okri and Bandele shows that Okri fits more neatly into the postmodernist category through his style of writing but this does not mean that Okri cannot also fit into the postcolonial category. Clearly, Okri displays an awareness of socio-political commitment which is affiliated to the poorest of the poor and to the heightening of man’s capability to attain the highest point of spiritual loftiness despite the physical constraints of poverty and environment. Hutcheon and other scholars
recognize that postmodernism and postcolonialism find areas of concern where they overlap such as the in the “formal, thematic and strategic” areas (Hutcheon 151b), and that magical realism is one such area where postcolonialism and postmodernism find points of conjunction. Chute reminds us that:

Comics, then, in the realm of the literary, places the reader within the space of narrative, amplifying postmodernism’s concern with location boundaries, depth and mapping. It returns us in the arena of literature, to a site of cultural production invested in textuality and print that yet is premised on the spatial in its construction and in the act of meaning-making on the part of the looker and viewer (359).

Chute observes that in recent times the term postmodernism has lost its popularity but it has mutated into different forms, reappearing in terms such as time and space, cognitive mapping. Although postmodernism has outgrown its name, it has not outgrown its efficacy. Korbut Salman, explains that:

Postmodernism is a transitional period in the human search for meaning, astonishing the mind with its sober vision of the inconceivable Truth, the notion of which gets completely substituted with limitless, chaotic and free-floating signification. This brings one to the verge of schizophrenic madness, with no means to enter the compulsory constructedness of existence, in which we have to be embedded so as to be called human. It is for this reason that instead of fruitless attempts to represent the world-as-it-is, one seeks to represent the world-as-it-is-not, willfully filling it with meaning and addictively constructing its new revised maxim (188).

The construction of alternative realities in magic realist narratives does conform to postmodernist ideology but the selected magic realist novels in this study require some level of stability and fixedness which postcolonial theory offers. In the ontological realm of the magical, Tutuola for example, explores mimicry opening up metafictional spaces where the narrator puzzles over how both the recognizable world and the ghostly world can coexist harmoniously. To solve this problem, he implores the assistance of the reader for a resolution. I find that postcolonial and psychoanalytic theory provides a concrete space to maneuver the topic of magical realism in Nigerian literature but inevitably postmodernism makes an appearance in my discussion of time and space in the these novels.

MAGICAL REALISM AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

It is important to note here that there are varying spellings of the word “post-colonial” or postcolonial. When spelt with a hyphen (post-colonialism), the term implies a chronological order—that is, a change from a colonial to a post colonial state. When spelt without the hyphen (postcolonialism), the term refers to writing that sets out one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives both before and after the period of colonization. According to some critics, the non hyphenated spelling covers a wider critical field, including literature of former British colonies, than does the hyphenated spelling (Pearson np 13 May 2014).

The most common variant is the unhyphenated one but a third variant which is post/colonial as some critics have argued, is more relevant than the previous two spellings because it stresses the interrelatedness between an indeterminate number of literatures whether they are Anglophone or not so long as they share a similar situation that exists between colonial/and post/colonial discourse and between coloniality and post/coloniality. Wole Ogundele and Esiaba Irobi are two critics who have questioned the scope of postcolonial literature in Africa. As a scholar in diaspora, Irobi passionately argues against building a theoretical dependence upon a historical event which neglects the reality of a pre-colonial existence that was rich in philosophy and theory. Irobi states that:

When we talk ecstatically about the achievements of postcolonial theory are we acquiescing to a notion that African theories of performance exist only because there was colonialism? What will happen if we throw overboard the notion of postcolonial theory and think of African and African derived performance theory in a diasporic trajectory instead of post-colonial episteme? (Irobi np 19April 2013)
He maintains that though the search for a pre-colonial theory will be oral in nature, it is viable and must be carried out in an African language which then may be translated. Irobi says that theory is contained not in typography but in the bodies of those who practice them. That is why performance theory could be transported across the world by slaves in diaspora wherever they were found all over the world. “Despite its good intentions, then, post-colonialism continues to render non-western knowledge and culture as ‘other’ in relation to the normative ‘self’ of Western epistemology and rationality (Irobi np 19 April 2013).”

Ogundele agrees that African literature and the criticism of African literature have failed in the task of historical engagement with pre-colonial Africa which is different from fictional representation of pre-colonial Africa in literature. He explains that language is a carrier of myths, beliefs, custom, and ideologies of a people. What is often overlooked is that language also carries theories which existed in pre-colonial Africa. The abandonment of African indigenous languages also implies the abandonment of pre-colonial theories. He further explains that: “…history is most often embedded in, not separate from artistic compositions which are conditioned by the imagination and social-political ideology their own time and place. And being artistic compositions, oral texts dwell more on the marvelous and extraordinary-the memorable-than the ordinary” (Ogundele 125).

However, the language question hardly arises when magical realism and post-colonial theory are considered in African American literature. It is rather an issue of power relations. Mehri and Leyli in their paper Magic(al) Realism as Postcolonial Device in Toni Morrison’s Beloved, restate Stephen Selmon’s perspective about the tension between the narrative structure of the real and the magical. They analyse Beloved as “post-colonial historiographic intervention, a strategic re-centering of American history in the lives of the African American who are historically dispossessed. Their interpretation of the novel reveals that magical realism is used to bring to life the collective memory of slavery in America and the presence of conflict between “freed body and the enslaved psyche of the ex-slave in Beloved. The conclusion of the paper captures its main essence in these words:

Postcolonial literature deals with the cultural identity of the subaltern in colonized societies and also the dilemma of developing a national identity after colonial rule. These struggles of identity, history and future possibilities are present in magical realist work of Toni Morrison. Introducing a magical character with a narrative voice, Beloved distorts the traditional conception of reality according to Eurocentric definitions. Moreover, Beloved becomes the medium through which victims of the Middle Passage gain a literate voice. (Mehri, Leyli: 118)

Postcolonial theory is engaged in debates about who when and what may be considered in analysis and interpretation, thereby it engages with various approaches which are all legitimate. Anne Hegerfeldt explains that magical realism in Britain expresses a kind of friction that can be identified on the textual level without necessarily resorting to extratextual references about subaltern relations with the dominant hegemony. Hegerfeldt explains that with British fiction it is not possible to put a dichotomy between rational vs irrational or scientific vs magical but there is evidence that there are “anthropological constants” (64) which persist even when they are incompatible with scientific world view.

In Hegerfeldt’s essay, she highlights some aspects of what she calls “literalization” in magical realism which consists of the literalization of metaphors, abstract nouns that acquire material presence, and the literalization of the psychological like ghosts as materialized memories. She also states that with magical realism there is subversion of roles in the sense that the idea of otherness is ascribed to the rational/scientific who take-on the role of outsiders. Carnival, madness and childhood are subverted as privileged in the ontological world of magical realism. In concluding, she says that: “As the analysis has shown, magic realism can and should be regarded as a postcolonial mode as far as it pursues an essentially postcolonial project (81).
The purported liberation of magical realism from the geographical specificity makes magical realism more pliable for post-modernist interpretations, a claim that Reddall refutes when he assigns it to theoathanatology. A view of postcolonial is seen through the eyes of Homi Bhabha—a prominent theorist in postcolonial studies in *The Location of Culture*.

The postcolonial perspective – as it is being developed by cultural historians and literary theorist—departs from the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment or ‘dependency’ theory. As a mode of analysis, it attempts to revise those nationalist or ‘nativist’ pedagogies that set up the relation of Third and First World in a binary structure of opposition. The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres. It is from the hybrid location of cultural value—the transnational as translational—that the postcolonial intellectual attempts to elaborate a historical and literary project. (Bhabha 173a)

In *Nation and Narrative*, (Bhabha np 23 April 2014) explains that nations are like narratives they emerge as a powerful historical idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force which is clouded in some ambivalence as regards to modernity and origins. It is in this described state of ambivalence and departure from tradition that the narrative style of magical realism can be placed. Rushdie’s *Midnights Children* is a famous example of a novel written in the magical realist mode. According to Sarah Bounse, *Midnight’s Children*’s importance and significance arises from the novel’s ability to intertwine three major themes; the creation and telling of history, the creation and telling of a nation’s and individual’s identity and the creation and telling of stories. Within these three connected themes, the novel explores the problems of postcoloniality, depicted in the novel as the difficulties in assigning one’s point of personal or national origin, the problems of determining ones personal and national history, and the impossibility of finding and achieving personal and national “authentic” identity. The novel expresses these themes of the creation and telling of history, identity and stories while simultaneously introducing the problems of postcolonial identity, through connected and dependent forms of hybridity. (np 8 January 2014)

Wendy Faris’ criteria for defining magical realism as a “mode” is the “irreducible element that is unexplained according to the laws of the universe...” In other words, magical realism is a combination of realism and the fantastic in which the former predominates (102). She further explains that because magical realism incorporates myths, legends, cultural practices and unrealistic events, it can be seen as a kind of “narrative primitivism”. More importantly she states that another reason why magical realism has played an active role in literary decolonization is that many of its texts “reconfigure structures of autonomy and agency, moves that destabilize established structures of power and control” (Faris np16 July 2013) this aspect of magical realism falls in line with modernism and postmodernism with the addition of the irreducible element making way for new forms of discourse. Postcolonial theory therefore, provides a framework for the theoretical interpretation of magical realism as it subverts western ideologies and creates new identities because of the nature of living in a hybridized society. The note of warning is that it must not be interpreted only at the political and historical levels but also at the level of psychological and textual interpretations.

Richard Brock uses the model of a frame as a conceptual tool to negotiate postcolonial discourse and its notions of ‘hybridity’ ‘mimicry’ and ‘writing back’. He agrees that postcolonial methodology and criticism has a ‘tendency to invisibility’ but provides an apparatus for locating the ever-shifting sites of agency in the complex critical operations of poststructuralist criticism. He states that the function of theory is to give rise to the work it represents, it lies outside the work but supplements it: “the non
synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existence” (106). Brock proposes a renewed attention to the space in which postcolonial discourse theory operates focusing on Bhaba and Helen Tiffin’s propositions. Their similarities lie in their suspicions of simple binary oppositions in resistance to imperial discourses which lock the colonized into terms of reference dictated by the colonizer. He claims that:

critics approaching new works from postcolonial perspective are liable to be increasingly faced with the “stark choice: to continue working within unmodified and increasingly outdated versions of frameworks established a quarter of a century ago, or to embrace a newer breed of postcolonial analysis, that for all its claims to the contrary, consciously fails to theorize the relationship between the work and its material contexts (115).

According to him, culture may refer to a collection of works to which an author contributes and/or to the contexts that give rise to these works: “Reflecting on this duality, we can begin to appreciate the privileged position of ‘culture’ in postcolonial discourse theory, as the mediating concept that links literary or artistic artifacts to the material conditions of their productions in and through the singular of the author… culture indicates the conditions, customs, practices and discourses that an author may be (reductively) assumed to represent (126)” He distinguishes a difference between ‘work’ and ‘text’ the work can be held in hand, the text is experienced only in an activity of production like Roland Barthes’ treatment of these two ideas, Brock neatly distinguishes his idea of the spatial and the temporal. The work occupies space, while the text exists in temporal movement thereby giving the text liminal qualities. The author is first of all a reader – whether of that author’s own work, a particular canonical work or the works of modernity and colonialist history. The critic is put in a position that supplements the reading of postcolonial text through which the work is “temporalized and its discourse allowed free and visible movement” (132). Brock uses the coordinates in his proposed “frame” – the author, the text and culture within which postcolonial theory operates, only that the operations of this frame are not as restrictive as older conceptions of postcolonial theory as a framework. Ultimately this frame centralizes the marginalized. The centralization of the marginalized is similar to the postmodernist attempt to put the marginalized in a position of power over oppressive influences. Another writer who has written about the position of magical realism in literature and postcolonial theory is Maggie Ann Bowers; she draws attention to two kinds of magical realism that have been identified.

Ontological magical can be described as magical realism that has as its source material beliefs or practices from the cultural context in which it is set… epistemological magical realism. On the other hand it takes its inspiration for its magical realist elements from sources which do not necessarily coincide with the cultural context of the fiction, or for that matter, of the writer (Bowers 91).

She warns that this assumption does not confine magical realist writers to any one of the categories but it means that one or both of these categorizations may be involved. A writer may use myths and cultural material as well as be engaged for reasons of literary or intellectual experimentation.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Mrinalini Greedharry’s study of postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis places psychoanalysis in postcolonial theory mapping the contribution of five critics namely: Frantz Fanon, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Homi Bhaba and Ashis Nandy. Greedharry groups Deleuze and Guattari as critics who use highly abstract forms of psychoanalysis language, but are concerned with the bodies produced by psychiatric practice bringing the discussion back to Fanon (9) Fanon insists that the political matters in our attempts to discuss the psyche of the man of color even if it does not matter when one discusses the psyche of others… the significance of Fanon’s work is his explicit politicization of psychoanalytic theory and psychiatric practice. However since he maintains that revolution and decolonization will allow the
man of colour to regain psychological health, he does not pursue the questions of how this restoration will take place (ii) Ashis Nandy uses psychoanalysis and psychology specifically to understand what conditions made psychological resistance to colonialism either possible or impossible... For Nandy, violent resistance is a less politically effective means of resistance than for example, psychological resistance because violence ties the colonized people firmly to the terms of colonialism (12) Homi Bhabha, whose work represents the most recent application of psychoanalytic theory than the colonial critique, seems to provide some answers to the problems in Nandy’s work with his insightful discussions of culture in the colonial world and the contemporary metropolitan world. Fanon and Nandy both turn to psychoanalytic theory to account for the ways in which colonized subjects experience colonialism and resist it, Bhabha uses it to account for the ways cultures interact (13).

Commenting on Nandy’s psychoanalytic technique, Greedharry interprets Nandy as opening new or previously unasked questions about colonial and postcolonial politics and uses psychohistory to produce an alternative to the modern history. Nandy emphasizes the individual rather than collective groups. He uses psychoanalytic concepts to understand historical events but attempts to disrupt history in the sense that the past is always part of the present. This is in order to write alternative histories.

However, Nandy is more interested in tracking how psychological motivations and conditions make successful resistance to colonialism possible or impossible rather than in delineating the psychology of the colonized. Indeed he says that one of the premises of his method is that it takes the possibility of psychological resistance – that is, how to be a successful ‘resister’—but psychology as resistance (Greedharry 47).

Although Bhaba bases much of his propositions using Fanon’s theory of psychoanalysis, Fanon’s argument is that his psychoanalytic concepts should not be regarded as universal.

Bhaba wants to draw our attention to the fact that Fanon does not have a suitable historical perspective for describing the history of the colonial psyche. The colonized psyche and Universal Man cannot both be represented in the same historical time with the master historical narratives that are available to Fanon. It is precisely this new kind of historical time that Bhaba attempts to define and display in his work and, as we shall see, Nandy provides another crucial element for theorizing Bhaba’s new historical time (Greedharry 80).

In this exposition, Greedharry sees Bhaba’s critique as being launched from inside the ‘problematics’ of Western philosophy while Nandy aims at re-historizing Indian culture giving Nandy a more specific task: “Nandy’s work and Bhaba’s are linked most strongly by the notion that psychoanalysis serves as a means of destabilizing western historicism and history. Bhaba clearly takes his critique in the direction of Derrida, Lacan and Foucault while Nandy pursues a critique that is perhaps more concerned with the representation of Indian history than with the history of Western modernity” (84).

In summary, Greedharry considers what the efforts of these theorists mean for psychoanalysis in postcolonial critique. Greedharry concludes that psychoanalysis itself is inherently “racializing and colonizing (149) therefore to fit its discourse into postcolonial studies requires “making a concerted critical effort to produce psychoanalysis as an “object” of colonial discourse analysis. Greedharry sees a need for “re-educating in psychoanalysis and reassembling it for different purposes (151), he outlines what can be done: (a) psychoanalysis must not overwrite postcolonial critiques (b) psychoanalysis should strategically abuse the aims and intentions of psychoanalysis using it for radically different purposes than originally intended because in Mannoni and Nandy’s projects the logical assumption is that psychoanalysis is an “ethnography of the white male heterosexual self” (c) postcolonial studies can and should rely more on literary text to answer questions about identity, subjectivity and identifications in the colony (d) psychoanalysis be considered as a practice at discourse that we can read as an index of the
colonial order of things. By using these parameters, psychoanalysis becomes the object of postcolonial studies rather than the comptroller.

CONCLUSION
With postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis, magical realism can explore interdisciplinarity through psychoanalysis in personality theories and explorations in dual consciousness. Through postcolonial theory magical realism can explore hybridity, mimicry and metafiction. It is imperative to note that by nature, there exists the indeterminacy of literature. The choice of theory in this study is an approach to magical realism.

WORKS CITED


