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Song of Solomon and the dialogic encounter of two cultures

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Abstract
Song of Solomon represents the dialogic encounter of two cultures, African and Western, through the use of African myths and European legends and fairy tales. Morrison employs magic realist strategies in her insertion of Western myths within an African American framework with the aim of valorising a so far discredited knowledge. She combines the acceptance of the supernatural with a profound rootedness in the real world, producing a mixture of fairy tale and family chronicle very close to Garcfa Mdrquez's saga of the Buendfas. Morrison bases her strategy on the beliefs of the black community and its way of viewing reality, thus claiming a particular cosmology that accommodates magic within the quotidian reality. This involves an ontological question: how do we name the world around us? Where lies the power to define reality and perception? What is true and what a product of our imagination?
The blending of two codes of reality, the natural and the supernatural, implies a transgression of boundaries: spiritual/material, life/death, animate/inanimate, subject/object, truth/fiction. It also implies a peculiar treatment of time and space, outside Western parameters. Morrison employs characteristics of black literature: a deliberate oral quality, based on storytelling; a chorus with a leading role; the presence of an ancestor; the participation of the reader. Song of Solomon acquires political dimensions by dealing with a number of social and historical topics, such as the loss of black culture as a result of the migration to the North, the clash between social classes, the emergence of black political activism, the role of black women, or the achievement of identity as a communal gesture. Strongly influenced by the black aesthetic movement of the 1960s, Song of Solomon offers a powerful combination of Afro-centric and feminist politics, which brings to the fore the political potential of magic realism.

Keywords: Africa, west, black aesthetic, myth, fantasy, oral tradition

Introduction
Song of Solomon is divided into two parts. The first part presents Milkman from his birth in 1931 up to the age of 31 in the urban environment of Michigan. The second part describes Milkman's journey into the rural South, to the towns of Danville and Shalimar. The static motifs of the first part are set in contrast with the dynamic treatment of the action in the second. Chiara Spallino interprets this structure as an interplay between two time-levels: family past and mythic past. The family past blocks the action and implies an annulment of time and a denial of future. Milkman (and his parents and sisters) are prisoners of time and materialism. The mythic past, hinted by Pilate, opens spaces and activates the development of the narration by pushing the protagonist towards the quest. According to Spallino, in the second part of the novel, the mythic past does absorb the family past.
The text recalls the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus and their desire to fly. There is a clear reference to The Odyssey in the figure of Circe. There are also direct and covert allusions to European fairy tales, such as Hansel and Gretel, Rumpeltstiltskin, Goldilocks, the King of the Mountain and Jack-and-the-Beanstalk. Biblical imagery is strong: the title of the novel itself seems to allude to the biblical Song of Solomon -a highly erotic love poem- and the names of principal women are taken from the Bible: Pilate, Ruth, Rebecca, Hagar, First Corinthians, Magdalena.
What is the purpose of this deliberate amalgam of myths and traditions? Morrison has pointed out that she pretended to give 'the sense of a mixture of cosmologies'. Morrison intends to question the validity of traditional Western myths as carriers/models of 'universal' values. They are clearly inadequate to describe the experience of an oppressed and marginalised minority. These myths and beliefs were imposed on the Africans dragged to America. However, they still kept their original myths and that is why the myth of the flying African, the slave who regained freedom by literally flying back to Africa, becomes the leitmotif of Song of Solomon. Morrison subverts the traditional myths by locating Solomon's flight at the forefront of her novel as a magical event which is part of the black community reality.
Seymour Menton, in his book, titled, *Magic Realism Rediscovered*, 1918-1981 also contends that magical realism is now a global trend and comments, "the emergence and persistence of magic realism in the twentieth century may be attributed to the western world's search for an alternative to the limitations of an overtly rational and technological society" (Menton 9-10).
Song of Solomon is based upon the legend of Solomon, the main character's great grandfather, an African slave who 'flew' back to Africa using his own power. The legend has been recorded as a folk song, 'Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone', sung by the children of Shalimar, a town which has

kept the name of this mythical slave (however, phonetically modified). Morrison draws here on the many African American folktales about escaping flying slaves. The power of flying has always had connections with freedom.

The novel presents a circular structure characteristic of oral and mythical traditions: it begins with a man, Robert Smith, flying off a roof and ends with Milkman flying off Solomon's Leap. The first scene, centred on the events surrounding the protagonist's birth, is particularly relevant because it introduces all the thematic and symbolic elements developed throughout the novel (the flight motif, naming as a means to power, history, racial clash, song as part of oral tradition) and also the major magic realist narrative techniques. It introduces us immediately to the idea of a binary world of realism/fantasy. As Morrison herself points out, the opening declarative sentence 'The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock' (3) is a parody of the opening of an item in a small-town newspaper. (7) The novel, then, starts with the tone of an everyday event of minimal local interest; however, the action is certainly out of the ordinary: a man is going to fly off from a roof in what appears to be an announced suicide, since two days before, he had tacked a note on his door specifying the exact date (Wednesday the 18th February, 193 1), time (3.00 p. m.) and place (Mercy), when he would fly with his 'own wings'. This first sentence also contains the key words of the novel: Life, Mutual, fly, Mercy. Furthermore, it conveys the sense of a paradoxical movement, from North Carolina (South) to Lake Superior (North), and a reference to the slave escape route.

The next sentence after the announcement links the action to a true historical event: Lindbergh's flight four years earlier. And then we are given a superb description of the carnivalesque street scene in the purest magic realist mode. Realistic details of daily life provide the setting, 'Children were in school; men were at work; and most of the women were fastening their corsets and getting ready to go see what tails or entrails the butcher might be giving away' (3-4). The narrative introduces next a major theme in the novel: the power of names to define reality and perception. The street where the only coloured doctor in town lived, Mains Avenue, was called Doctor Street by the black population. The city legislators forbade such name in an absurd attempt to impose its official name. The reaction was to call it Not Doctor Street. Similarly, the charity hospital was called No Mercy Hospital because it did not accept coloured people. Not Doctor Street and No Mercy Hospital are signals of subversiveness through language by oppressed groups, in this case, the black community, and provide an instance of competing notions of reality, of how we call the world around us.

The main characteristic of magic realist writing, the coexistence of two codes of reality, the natural and the supernatural, becomes patent through the transgression of borders. The narrative constantly slips from one code to the other, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, life and death, material and spiritual. The opposition between animate and inanimate becomes neutralised as, for instance, in the mysterious large water mark on the mahogany table of Ruth's house: it seems to have a life of its own and functions as a mooring, a checkpoint to assure her that this was life and not a dream. Over the years, the water mark comes to epitomize Ruth's life:

> Even in the cave of sleep, without dreaming of it or thinking of it at all, she felt its presence. Oh, she talked endlessly to her daughters and her guests about how to get rid of it-... it behaved as though it were itself a plant and flourished into a huge suede-gray flower that throbbed like fever, and sighed like the shift of sand dunes. But it could also bestill. Patient, restful, and still. (11-13)

There is a pronounced communication between the realm of the living and of the dead, which is not questioned by the characters or the narrator. Numerous ghosts occur in the story and illustrate this point. The town gossip, Freddie, explains to Milkman how his mother was killed by ghosts, by a 'woman turned into a white bull' (110). Milkman reacts with certain doubts to the truth of the existence of ghosts. However, as the story progresses, he ends up believing in such 'other' reality. That is mainly due to Pilate's contact with the ghost of her dead father. She has multiple encounters with him and seeks his help. It is interesting to note how these ghost figures are introduced in realistic detail, as something quotidian and natural. For instance, Pilate describes his father as wearing 'a white shirt, a blue collar, and a brown peaked cap. He wore no shoes (they were tied together and slung over his shoulder), probably because his feet hurt, since he rubbed his toes a lot as he sat near her bed or on the porch, or rested against the side of the still' (150). A supernatural apparition is presenting as wearing a shirt and a cap and in such a 'human' gesture as rubbing his toes. Moreover, Pilate expresses no surprise at seeing him thus. This magic realist strategy turns the supernatural into an earthly, daily event.

The merging of the spiritual and material worlds is also evident in the treatment of dreams. Morrison considers the spiritual forces as the reality, what informs your sensibility: 'I grew up in a house in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority that they talked about what "really" happened' (13). Dreams juxtapose realistic detail with magical resonances. The frontier between dream and reality is not defined at all, as when Milkman explains a dream he had about his mother to Guitar: 'he began to describe to Guitar a dream he had had about his mother. He called it a dream because he didn't want to tell him it had really happened, that he had really seen it' (104). In that dream/reality (we are never further told if it did or did not 'really' take place), Ruth is suffocated by growing bloody red tulips in her garden, while she seems to enjoy it. Milkman does not help her; he stands passively looking at her. The scene has surrealistic resonances with the colour red and the gigantic tulips, and functions as a symbol of Milkman's selfishness and irresponsibility towards his mother. It is also connected with a previous scene with the same dreamlike quality. After hitting his father, Milkman goes to the street to look for Guitar. There he realises that everybody is crammed on one side of the street, going in the direction he is coming from, while the other side is completely empty. He feels anxious about that and cannot understand it, but 'Milkman walked on, still headed toward Southside, never once wondering why he himself did not cross over to the other side of the street, where no one was walking at all' (78).

Milkman definitely thinks that everybody, his parents, his sisters, his friends, are going in the wrong direction and not he. He has problems of distinguishing reality from waking dreams, as when he sees the white peacock. Only when Guitar sees the bird as well, does Milkman believe in its tangible reality. A white peacock poised on the roof of a used-car building in the middle of town seems to defy again the borders between fact and imagination. The bird becomes a recurrent image to symbolise vanity and the need for Milkman to get rid of his materialistic approach if he wants to find his true identity. Guitar explains its inability to fly: 'Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down' (179).

The transgression of boundaries characteristic of magic realism implies a constant slippage between the natural and the supernatural. An example of how such slippage is enacted through the creation of an eerie atmosphere occurs when Milkman and Guitar go at night to Pilate's house to steal her sack. The scene is set by means of magic realist techniques: an inexplicable spice-sweet smell invades the city on autumn nights, 'An odor like crystallized ginger, or sweet iced tea with a dark tea clove floating in it' (184). There is no rational explanation for this smell, which is brought by the wind from the lake. It seems to be invested with magical powers and have a life of its own:

> So the ginger sugar blew unnoticed through the streets, around the trees, over roofs, until, thinned out and weakened a little, it reached Southside.... And there the ginger smell was sharp, sharp enough to distort dreams and make the sleeper believe the things he hungered for were right at hand. To the Southside residents who were awake on such nights, it gave all their thoughts and activity a quality of being both intimate and far away. (184-85)

In the treatment of time, we find the characteristic magic realist combination of linear and circular time. The novel as a Bildungsroman requires a chronological structure which follows the protagonist from his birth to his achievement of maturity and possible death. However, the narrative continuously meanders with other sorts of time, eternal, circular, typical of fairy tales and legends. This is particularly noticeable in the second part of the novel, when Milkman enters the deep South and with it another sphere where time seems more fluid. Time also acquires materiality, as can be observed in Pilate's carrying her past with her in the form of stones and bones, or in the idea of the Seven Days and their expression 'Your Day has come'; depending on which day of the week a black person was killed, the corresponding man of the society is the one in charge to perpetrate a similar crime - Guitar is the Sunday man.

Morrison attempts to recreate in her texts the rich African American oral tradition. Through the manipulation of language and the use of storytelling, she provides her novels with a deliberate oral quality. The use of singing as a subversive practice to keep history alive, together with the elaborate processes of naming that seem characteristic of the African culture, contribute to the dominance of folk culture and the oral tradition.

If Morrison intends to make an art both beautiful and unquestionably political, her commentaries on magic realism seem a bit misleading. In different interviews, Morrison has showed her mistrust concerning this term, as a convenient way for literary critics to skip what is the truth in the art of certain writers. For Morrison, magic realism can be a label used to cover up what is going on, a way of not talking about the politics, 'If you could apply the word "magical" then that dilutes the realism but it seemed legitimate because there were these supernatural and unrealistic things, surreal things, going on in the text. '(27) However, as we have maintained, magic realism does talk about politics; it does not dilute the realism, it enhances it. With its emphasis on the instinctual, irrational, and supernatural, magic realism is politicised in that it offers an alternative to the rational, commercialized and commodified hegemonies of patriarchal society. It is not another evasive label but fits Morrison's requirement that all work must be political. The agenda of magic realist narratives is the same as the one set by Morrison in the novel under analysis.

Song of Solomon deals with social problems between classes, the rich and the poor, within the black community. Macon and his greedy materialism, represented by the keys to his properties and his big Packard, symbolize those black men that follow white ways of life and enrichment. Macon has lost his sympathy towards other poorer members of his community and become a ruthless landlord. It is implied that the massive migrations of the black population from the South to the North led to this sort of self-made man in the Western tradition of the American dream. The price paid was very high: the loss of black culture and all those spirituals and communal values still found in the South. Due to the migration to the North, social changes and the submission to a consumer society provoked a profound alienation of African Americans. The American dream, owning things, has replaced the memory of a black cultural heritage. The patriarchal, nuclear family represented by Macon shows the degeneration of Western values.

Reference

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