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Framing the Magic Realism: A Study of the Film Adaptation of *Beloved*

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Abstract

Written in 1987, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* explores the story of a family of former slaves and their house named 124, which is haunted by a malevolent spirit. Set in the post-Civil War America, the novel discusses the dismantling of identities by the institution of slavery as well as explores the emotional, physical, and spiritual devastation that led to the cultural bereavement. To express the same, Morrison has used magic realism as the tool of narration. The paper aims to discuss the use and potential of magic realism as a radical narrative tool. The agony of the abused and the trauma of the institution of slavery are brought back to reality from the other world. This glimpse of something else from the other side of the world transforms the reality rather than abandoning it, and works as an attempt to voice the uneven cultural situation, so as to raise political and philosophical questions for the future. The purpose is to interpret the underlying reasons for Morrison's use of magic realism as a key tool of expression in a post-colonial framework. This paper also studies the cinematic techniques of magic realism as applied by Jonathan Demme on screen and the political dimensions associated with it, in order to understand the treatment and power of magic realism at the hands of a white-male filmmaker.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, film adaptation, Jonathan Demme, postcolonialism

Introduction

Magic realism originated as an art movement in the early twentieth century. The term was first used by German art critic, Franz Roh, who associated the term to

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describe paintings that rejected expressionism and explored the hidden mysteries behind reality. Over time, the term got associated with Latin American novelists such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, and Alejo Carpentier. Afterwards, the cinematic adaptations of magic realist texts began to appear on the screen and magic realism began to take a prominent space in avant-garde or experimental cinema while its use as a narrative tool was explored by filmmakers.

J. L. Austin, a philosopher of language, in his book *How To Do Things With Words* (1955), argues that language does not just describe the world but also creates it. Language also affects the world. Magical realist narration effectively alters reality and interrogates the centre. The creative resistance embedded in the juxtaposition of magic with reality is both an attempt to heal historical wounds and a voice to challenge the authority of the oppressors. Magic realism takes readers far from reality yet keeps them intact in the real world. Instead of searching for another reality hidden beneath what is visible, it presents a transformed reality without abandoning the real world. This gives a deeper understanding of what lies beyond the projected reality and therefore the representation of the same might not be facts but truth. To a large extent, rationality is what magic realism condemns despite favourable considerations being put on order and clarity in magic-realist paintings. As said by Maggie Ann Bowers, through the use of magic realism writers create "a space beyond authoritative discourse, where the unrepresentable can be expressed" (81). The creation of time and space to represent the unrepresentable is done to give voice to the unspoken truth and reality. Thereby the antithetical aspects of lived experience appear together, both spatially and temporally.

Magic Realism in Postcolonial Framework

Abdul R. Jan Mohamed, in his essay, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature", opined that the 'othering' of a vast number of people by European colonists' thoughts, and their construction as backward or inferior depended on *Manichean dualism.* This dualism and the Otherisation has thereby produced binary oppositions between the colonisers and the colonised based on cultural and racial differences. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison uses magic realism to attack these binary oppositions as constructed by colonialism. She embeds the poetic politics in *Beloved* by decentering privileged western rationality with the use of magical myths to undermine the hegemonic rationality and critique the dominant system of power and oppression. Her writing sketches a denied history and holds a dialogue with past memories to identify the failure of 'rationality' within the institution of slavery. Furthermore, magic realism in *Beloved* operates as a cultural remedial, as Zamora and Faris, in their work *Magical Realism*, propose, "In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinise accepted realistic conventions of casualty, materiality, and motivation" (3).

The novel is set in the free state of Ohio and the slave state of Kentucky. The story is based on the real-life anecdote of Margaret Garner, a slave who ran away from the clutches of slavery and killed her children in order to send them to the other world away from the abuses of the institution of slavery. In *Beloved*, the dead is the 'magical', brought back to the 'reality' projected by rational western ideologies. The text revolves around the story of Sethe, a black woman who escapes from Sweet Home to live a life free from slavery. Her new life in Ohio is full of hope but the memories of her past haunt her. In order to run away from slavery, Sethe resorted to some harsh and intense life decisions, one of which was killing her daughter to protect her from the oppressors. This was described by Stamp in the text as Sethe's "desire to out-hurt the hurter" (Morrison 276). The 'magical' appearance of the dead baby as a ghost in the new 'reality' opted by Sethe in Ohio brings to light the suppressed voice via the implementation of magic realism. The supernatural uncovers the ideological crack that what exists for one group might not exist for the other. The existence of the ghost and the reference to the mythological Abiku child can be accepted in the oppressed community but the oppressor concerning their 'western rationality' would choose not to see or hear the ghost because in scientific terms it cannot exist. The acknowledgement of the above would mean recognition of the existing social oppression. The novel weaves an intricate web of constructive associations among the socially repressed community, the doubly-marginalized state of women, and the "dead Negro's grief" (Morrison 6) in the appearance of the ghost in flesh in the real world.

In *Beloved*, Morrison's conscious painful engagement with the past and the supernatural invasion exposes the wounds of reality and reveals the postcolonial state of the oppressed communities wherein the traumas of colonialism still haunt and affect the lives of the colonised communities. As said by George Lamming, "the colonial experience is a continuing psychic experience that has to be dealt with and will have to be dealt with long after the actual colonial situation formally ends" (qtd. in Hulme 120). Since colonialism is based on the doctrine of cultural hierarchy and supremacy, the colonisers, in an attempt to control and civilise the indigenous, dismantled the native cultures. Under the state of colonialism, the native identities were dismantled in order to be shaped and constructed through the ideologies and values of the colonialist.

In a space where the dominant language is different from that of 'theirs', writers like Toni Morrison create scope for the native voices amid the hegemonic discourse. With magic realism as a tool of narration, Toni Morrison asserts her native culture and identity. The relationship between postcolonialism and magic realism further develops when the language and the reality of the colonisers are seized and altered in a discourse more acceptable to the colonised community. The major role of the juxtaposition of 'magical' in the 'real' is to decentralise the idea of reality and shake the hegemonic ground of conditioning.

In a postcolonial framework, using magic realism gives Morrison the power to construct a place for the blacks in white American history. The writer emphasises the African culture and heritage, by infusing the myths and magic in the obstinate western rationality. Morrison takes her cross-cultural stance and gives the displacement a strong voice. Displacement becomes a major concern in postcolonial literature. What lies beyond this dislocation is the fact that no matter where the oppressed run, the trauma haunts them until confronted. The given idea has been presented with the infusion of the supernatural in the concerned text, which makes Sethe's house in Ohio appear as a person rather than a structure, a person that weeps, sighs, trembles, and falls into fits.

Furthermore, the representation of Sethe's rememory using the implementation of magic realism and the appearance of the ghost in flesh reconstructs the individual and collective history of the black men and women in the aftermath of slavery and colonization. In African mythology, Abiku is a child who returns from the dead to be born again to the same mother. When Beloved appears in the real world as "a fully dressed woman out of the water" and is encountered by Sethe, Morrison describes it as: "The moment she got close enough to see her face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity. She said, "Oh, excuse me" and ran around to the back of 124… Right in front of its door she had to lift her skirts and the water she voided was endless" (61).

Beloved being re-born to the same mother and appearing in flesh is portrayed by the metaphor of Sethe's bladder being full to capacity suggesting the water break phase of pregnancy. The African myth of Abiku, as embedded in the magical and supernatural, speaks for past reclamation and traditional recovery. Towards the end of the novel, the expulsion of Beloved as a ghost from the real world depicts Morrison's postcolonial approach to reclaim the past and project it with the need of the oppressed to be grounded by history but not crushed by it.

Thus, it cannot be denied that writers started using magic realism as a tool of resistance to give voice to the stories of the marginalised by portraying an altered reality from the perspectives of people lacking political power. This creative movement was a step toward asserting the dismantled and lost identities of the native.

Magic Realism on Screen in *Beloved* (Jonathan Demme, 1998)

In 1998, Jonathan Demme directed the film adaptation of Morrison's *Beloved*. The area of concern for this section of the paper is to analyse the cinematic techniques used by Jonathan Demme to present magic realism in his film, and the socio-political stance behind the alterations being done in the process of adapting *Beloved* on screen.

"Adaptation refers to the process of transformation and transmutation when a text belonging to one medium is transformed into another medium using a different sign system" (Sachdeva xvi). Suggesting translation as a metaphor for adaptation, Linda Hutcheon sees adaptation as "interpretive creation" (*A Theory of Adaptation* 18). Film adaptation as a process involves both interpretation and recreation of the source text. E. H. Gombrich offers a useful analogy to understand the art of adaptation. He propounds, "if an artist stands before a landscape with a pencil in hand, the artist will look for aspects that can be rendered in lines, but if it is the paintbrush that the hand holds, the artist's vision of the very landscape will be in terms of masses not lines" (qtd. in Hutcheon, "On the Art of Adaptation" 109). Thus, an adapter coming to a story with the idea of adapting it for a film can or may approach it from a different aspect.

Many film critics have proposed different categories to understand different aspects of adaptations. As per Geoffrey Wagner, there are "three possible categories to asses any adaptation: (a) transposition, in which a novel is represented on screen with a minimum of apparent interference; (b) commentary, where the original narrative is either purposely or inadvertently altered; and (c) analogy, which represent a considerable departure from the original" (qtd. in Sachdeva xxxiv).

Now since there is a difference in the nature of the language used by the novel and the film, there exist some challenges that every filmmaker has to deal with during the process of adaptation. While reading, readers make sense of the story by simultaneously creating a world of their imagination. In other words, reading requires a mental translation. Films, on the other hand, require the viewers to encounter images before making sense of the story. It is important to understand what lies beyond the images that one encounters while viewing a film. The fundamental differences in the languages of cinema and literature become a major challenge that every filmmaker tackles. As said by Vivek Sachdeva in his book *Fiction to Film: Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's The Householder and Heat and Dust, "*Words in novels, to use the terminology of semiotics, are signs which do not have meaning in themselves; they communicate only through conventional agreement. Images, on the other hand, are direct and iconic in nature; they stand for what they represent." (Sachdeva xxxiv) While adapting a novel into a film, the filmmaker has to face the challenge of transforming the text from one medium to another using a different sign system.

That being said, the exploration of cinematic techniques used by Jonathan Demme in presenting the magic realist elements of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* becomes the area of concern to understand how Jonathan Demme has translated Morrison's words into images using the language of film and how he has dealt with the aesthetics of transcription from novel to film.

Cinematic Language of Jonathan Demme's *Beloved*

The magical realist narratives have ekphrastic passages and descriptions which are difficult to adapt on screen, given the challenge of choosing appropriate methods. In magical realist novels, accurate attributes can be ensured by simply labelling the attributes of both the magical and the real. On the other hand, while presenting the same on the screen, the filmmaker has to depend upon the audience's agreement with the justice of the visual clues. In the words of Robert Stam, "The art of film adaptation partially consists in choosing which generic conventions are transposable into the new medium and which need to be discarded, supplemented, transcoded, or replaced" (6). In other words, the process of film adaptation is certainly a surgical art.

Beloved, both the novel and the film, are "polyperceptual: they engage with numerous voices and narratives by telling and retelling the same event from Sethe's, Denver's and Paul D's perspectives" (Mask 283). Talking about the language of magic realism, the *grotesque* takes a prominent space. Readers and the viewers encounter these aesthetics of grotesque from the perspectives of different characters. While Toni Morrison has verbally constructed the grotesque body of *Beloved*, Jonathan Demme has visually presented the magic realist intermingling of human and beast, "trading places within the slippery hierarchy of a grotesquely carnivalized world" (Mask 278). The notion of grotesque acts as an anti-hegemonic strategy by temporally and spatially determining transgressions followed by the restoration of the social order. The narrative aesthetics of both Morrison's Beloved and Demme's film adaptation travel between carnivalesque and grotesque realms to present the magical-real.

Moreover, to bring the magic realist element to the centre of the film, Demme uses the emblematic shot of a gravestone in the first scene. The camera moves towards the gravestone and it reads "Beloved". This shot situates the genre and narrative for the viewers. Gravestone denotes a dead being and connotes the 'magical appearance' of the same in the film. Jonathan Demme further radicalises the magical realist narrative on-screen through an audio-visual montage that foregrounds the mysteriousness and strangeness of the supernatural element. The scene when Beloved appears in flesh and walks out of the water is presented with abrupt intercuttings and juxtaposition of different images in frames, one after another. The use of fast, jerky, and abrupt editing gives viewers the taste of magic(al) getting merged with the real. To describe in words, the scene begins with a shot of a leaf flowing in a river; a water drop falls and the pattern of the river changes; the next shot juxtaposes the pattern formed in the river with imagery of trees, with another abrupt cut, a high angle shot reveals Beloved walking out of the river water. (Beloved 30:16 - 31:10). Another prominent scene featuring the magical on-screen is when Beloved hears Sethe getting close to Paul D, the emotional turmoil of the ghost losing her possession of Sethe's love is expressed with the use of montage technique.

The scene begins with a wide-angle shot of Beloved crying and running towards the river, with a cut the frame changes, and a high angle shot capturing river water is used to present Beloved's turmoil. Denver's face appears in the water, and with another cut, two turtles on each other symbolising love appear in the frame. In the next shot, a close-up of Beloved's neck is presented; she moves her neck, and the image of water moving in circles is merged with this shot. The turtles move away from each other and the sky is shown to change shades in the next shot. The image of shades of the sky is then juxtaposed with the trees and with the next shot we reach back to house 124. (*Beloved* 1:25:13 - 1:27:21).

Since the 'magical' in Beloved is the reincarnated daughter of Sethe, the conversation of the past with the present becomes important. This conversation, when visually presented, comes across as a resolution where the language of colonisers is seized and altered into a discourse more acceptable to the present and future of the colonised community. The flashback technique, as used by Demme, works closely aligned with the psyche of the characters. The way Demme presents flashbacks is majorly by the use of the fade and dissolve technique. The face of the person whose flashback appears on the screen is shown with a close-up and then it fades and dissolves with images of the past being presented on the screen. The shift in temporal and spatial settings also explains the transition from present to past and vice-versa. This is important with reference to magical realist narrative because most magical realist narratives in a postcolonial and postmodern framework have non-linear narration. In a larger context, the nonlinear sequencing of events appears as a prominent characteristic of magical realist cinema as well. The technique of flashback bridges the gap between the linear and the non-linear, the past and the present, and the magical and the real.

Shifting of Tonal Palettes, Close-up Shots, and Symbolism

Apart from using montage and the fade-dissolve technique of flashbacks, to present the magical and real, and the past and present, Jonathan Demme has played with the application of colour to particular images in the film which, according to Fredric Jameson, signals the materialization of thoughts as repressed or unfulfilled desires. In his words, the application of colours in magical realist films acts as a "punctual beat of energy" (Jameson 314). In other words, the given application creates visual shock and acts as psychological stimuli. The shifting of tonal palettes in Jonathan Demme's *Beloved* differentiates the magical from the real, and the past from the present. The interplay between brilliant and dull tones is Demme's way of conversing visually with the viewers. Morrison herself describes this shift in colour tones as follows: "Paul D tied his shoes together, hung them over his shoulder and followed her through the door straight to a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood" (10).

Demme has used the reference of ‘red light’ to present the supernatural presence in the real world. When Paul D is attacked by the baby ghost for the first time with a table rushing towards him, everything turns red. The visual application of the red colour is again done when Beloved visits Paul D in the shed and asks him to touch her on the inside and call her name. The shed glows red and signifies blood and sacrifice. This shifting of tonal palettes refuses conventional realism and brings in visuals of the ‘magical’ and its representation.



Use of red light to present the supernatural. (*Beloved* 1:33:49)

Demme's use of red light is highly emotional, sensory, and subjective. The codified meaning behind the shift in colour palettes and the application of colour filters affects the viewers and creates an emotional state. Furthermore, to present the flashbacks Demme uses sepia tones. The sepia tones in a way act as a guide for the viewers to interpret what is on screen as the past in reference to the present and real-world of the film.



Presentation of the past with the use of sepia tones. (*Beloved* 1:21:41)

One prominent and noticeable characteristic of Demme's art of adaptation is his way of using visual metaphors to create an emotional state. Morrison presents the supernatural in her novel as a curious creature. The 'magical' in her text desires to know and meet the 'real'. Beloved asks many questions from Sethe about the reality that she missed after being dead. The desire of the 'magical' to know the 'real' is presented by the visual imagery of 'burning fire' in the background when Beloved sits in the foreground asking Sethe questions related to her past life outside 124. (*Beloved* 50:02 and 2:05:24)



Beloved and Sethe in the foreground and the symbol of burning fire in the background: 48:28

The fire in the background of the frame metaphorically presents Beloved's desire to know about Sethe and possess her attention and love.

While presenting the real world of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D in house 124, Jonathan Demme has effectively used close-up shots. In a 2015 interview with *Plugged In*, Demme said, "The most powerful shot of all is when you put the viewer right in the shoes of one of the characters so that they are seeing exactly what the character is seeing" (Demme DGA Quarterly). The long-shots give the audience a path to escape into passivity, but Jonathan Demme with his use of close-ups keeps the viewers intact, alert, and active even when the 'magical' is depicted on the screen. Precisely, Jonathan Demme has used the aesthetics of grotesque, montage technique, abrupt cutting, the juxtaposition of images in frames, non-synchronous sounds, and application of colour filters to present the magic realism of Morrison's *Beloved* on screen. The filmmaker has portrayed the magical, with the same idea as that of Morrison, to only present the magical to transform the reality and not abandon it.

Political Dimensions Associated with Jonathan Demme's *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a multi-layered text that uses magic realism as an expression to tell the horrifying history of African Americans as affected by the institution of slavery. The text holds stories of the past, of not just the main protagonist Sethe but also of the men who were tortured by the schoolteacher and other white men at Sweet Home in Kentucky - Halle, Paul D, Sixo, and Paul A. The novel also elaborates on the story of Baby Suggs. The film adaptation of *Beloved* does not offer us the multi-layered story as presented by Morrison. Jonathan Demme's *Beloved* does not carry the story of these black men but focuses only on what happens inside the house at Bluestone, keeping Sethe, Denver, and Beloved as the central characters. Though both the novel and the movie portray the psychological struggle of enslaved people in claiming ownership of their minds and body, Jonathan Demme's decision of eliminating the stories of the black men of Sweet Home makes the film women-centric. After Beloved (the baby ghost) completely captures Sethe's mind and energy and disrupts her workings, Denver comes to the centre of the story, and Paul D is almost eliminated. This makes the film a representation of horror in a family saga where Sethe and Denver form a small family.

The horrors of the institution of slavery from the larger space in the white country are zoomed-in within the four walls of 124 at Bluestone. That is where Morrison's voice behind the creation of the baby ghost in flesh and the use of magic realism comes into function. Because even though Demme has changed the spatial focus of the horrors of the institution of slavery, the potential of Morrison's magic realism still speaks for "sixty million and more" (Morrison v).

The political motive of Jonathan Demme in casting Oprah Winfrey as Sethe gives the film a distinct voice. Both Winfrey and Demme, before *Beloved*, have presented their humanist views. The popularity of Oprah Winfrey and her humanistic views add an additional layer of message to the otherwise conventional approach of Demme's depiction of horror. Furthermore, Demme's stand of altering the stories of black men, by focusing merely on the stories of the women staying in house 124, implies that the horrors of the institution of slavery affected one section of the community rather than the community as a whole.

In 1991, Demme's film *The Silence of the Lambs* was highly attacked by feminists in terms of problematic depiction of gender issues. The stereotypes around transwomen and internal sexism were brought to light by feminist critics. Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, objected to "the evisceration of the female body" and said that "*The Silence of the Lambs* was absolutely outrageous" (98). Cynthia Freeland, a Feminist philosopher, highlighted that Clarice's allegiance with Hannibal undermines her power and puts her in parallel with the serial killer. Some feminists even criticized Demme for creating an image of a phallic woman in *The Silence of the Lambs*.

In adapting a novel of an African American woman, and casting popular women figures like Oprah Winfrey and Beah Richards, Jonathan Demme created *Beloved*, as a world of women. He has thereby used the women-centric interpretation and creation of Morrison's Beloved as an artistic instrument to redeem his social voice as a filmmaker in order to rectify his stand as a humanist. Additionally, he has altered the ending. While Morrison's *Beloved* ends with the conversation between Paul-D and Sethe, wherein Paul-D says "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison 322). Demme's *Beloved* ends with the message delivered by Baby Suggs - "love the heart more than the lungs and the wombs, for that is the prize" (Beloved 2:40:02 - 2:40:58). Though what is worth noticing here is that despite offering the viewers only a layer from the multi-layered story presented by Morrison in the fiction, the movie does not leave the viewers tidy. The filmmaker has used strong visual imagery to hit the psyche of viewers and present the horror beyond the horrifying ghost.

Conclusion

Magic realism as a tool of narration is not merely a creative device. Its political and cultural potential speaks for the oppressed and creates an alternate reality amid the established real world. The adaptation of the magical realist narratives can be challenging yet with the use of cinematic techniques the realism on screen can be diminished by the filmmakers. With the aesthetics of grotesque, juxtaposition of images, montage technique, application of colour filters, flashbacks with fade and dissolve technique, and non-linear sequencing, adapting a magical realist

narrative can speak on screen too. Thereby, becoming a liberating and transformative narrative mode. Beyond everything, it opens door to more voices and perceptions, and creates a sympathetic audience by developing an intimate affair between the reader/viewer and the text, as said by Maggie Ann Bowers "magic realism as a form of art relies most upon the belief, the perspective and the willingness to change those beliefs and perspectives of the readers and the viewers" (123).

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