Magic Realism in Kim Scott's *True Country*

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> Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-between-ness, their all at onceness encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures…
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> … [M]agical realism is a mode suited to exploring – and transgressing – boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic. – Zamora and Faris (1995, 5)
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> Drawing on the special effects of magic realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement…[T]hey combine the supernatural with local legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent societies which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption. Magic-effects, therefore, are used to indict the follies of both empire and its aftermath. – Elleke Boehmer (1995, 235)
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> …[T]here are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracle places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. – Salman Rushdie (1982, 9)

If the last aforementioned quotation is a borrowing from Salman Rushdie, then the reason lies in Kim Scott's very acknowledgement of Rushdie's influence (precisely the stylistic sway) in his own writings.[1] Himself a proponent of magic realism, Rushdie has gone to make a reassessment of history through this tool. In Imaginary Homelands Rushdie interrogates the absolutist assumptions of history: 'History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge' (1991, 25). It is thus in his attempt to initiate an insurgency against the White documented historical construct that Australian author Kim Scott, a Nyoongar descendant of south west of Western Australia, a la Rushdie in his True Country (1993) employs magic realism. True Country in its very stylization brings into fore the "Resistance" of his community to the colonizing dominance of the *wadjilas* (white people). Scott's fiction is no mere direct document of socio-politico-economic rhetoric of confrontation towards the modernist agency of Australian White Nation building; but further the representative methodology in the genre, to which the author takes recourse to, is in itself a cultural deconstructive challenge to the hitherto established western standardized canonical fictional genres. Thus, the aspiration of formulating an identity is not solely that of a self or community but also an artistic distinctiveness: "The central strategy in transformations of colonial culture is the seizing of self-representation. Underlying all economic, political and social resistance is the struggle over representation that occurs in language, writing and other forms of cultural production". (Ashcroft, 2, 2001)

Gleyns Collard in the "Introduction" to Kura, the transcribed yarns of William Thomas Bennell, depicts the reluctance of some speakers of the Noongar language to pass on their knowledge: "They feel it could be absurd and may not

be given the status, respect or appreciation it deserves. There are those who would look at Noongar Mythology as *katakata* (lies) or fairy tales" (1991, viii).Yet Kim Scott almost audaciously adopts this very method of accumulating the 'magic-realist' Noongar knowledge as a process for his identity formation and uses it as the very tool to destabilize the distortions caused to his identity in particular and the Noongar history in the general allegorical proportions. Canadian critic Robert Rawdon Wilson's ideas about the spatial effects of magic realism might be particularly useful in the context of postcolonial writing. Magic realism, he points out, creates a "space in which the spatial effects of canonical realism and those of axiomatic fantasy are interwoven . . . in magic realism, space is hybrid (opposite and conflicting properties are co-present)."(1990, 204) Magic realism has been described as writing that works both within and against the aesthetics of realism; and postcolonial writing, suggests a writing that works both within and against the effects of colonialism. The hybridity of both modes of writing indicates strong possibilities for an interweaving of their agendas. Magic realism contests the restrictions of colonial space by opening up a "dual spatiality," thus making problematic any notion of a single unified world-view or reality. Wilson further notes that, "it is as if there are two worlds, (wholly distinct, following dissimilar laws) which interact, interpenetrate, and interwind, unpredictably but in a fully natural manner."(1990, 204) As Chanady suggests, the enabling of new and multiple perspectives on events "allows us to see dimensions of reality of which we are not normally aware."(1985, 27) Magic realism, with its "eruptions of spatial folding" raises questions about the nature of the worlds we inhabit. Stephen Slemon claims that magic realism's strength is that it encodes "a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems", and further the deployment of magic realism in literature can "signify resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems." (Spring 1988,10).In opposition to straight-forward, rational and controlled order which is the dominant style of imperialism, magic realism mixes fantasy and reality, fact and myth, while resisting classical expectations of closure and unity. True Country of Kim Scott similarly refuses to subscribe to the unified, coherent standardized style of the western canonical fictions and appropriates the logic of White Australian modernity through subversion. Scott 'narrates', in the most Bhabhaesque sense, the tendency towards creation of an assimilationist homologous Nation space through his novels, by relying on magic realism as one of his potent discursive tools. The modernist tendency towards logic and ratiocination have been employed on the Aboriginal masses in the attempt towards colonization— an unwanted heritage that could not be disowned. Further, it is this very imposed and imported, bizarre and banal worldview that appeared problematic in the mythical-mystical psyche and cartography of the Aboriginal world. What comes handy in appropriating the same is the technique of Magic Realism, a technique that offers a dialectical negotiation between the two otherwise binary cultures.

Hence, the Magic Realism employed by Scott is no mere *purpures pannus*. Far from being a sheer decorative appendix, the tool serve to break open the hitherto obfuscated and silenced gory history of the Nyoongars and help the chief narrator of the text to come to terms with his otherwise prevaricating sense of identity. Scott involves the sense of ontological Magic Realism to serve his ends.[2] Rawdon Wilson in The Metamorphosis of Fictional Space: Magical Realism states that:

> Magical realism involves, at the very least, Cartesian dualities: antinomies between natural and supernatural, explicable and inexplicable. (It also employs a certain mode of narrative voice, though critics often ignore this when they think about magical realism). Magical realism can be, an indeed is, used to describe virtually any literary text in which binary oppositions, or antinomies, can be discovered. (1995, 223)

But, the Aboriginal Dreamtime, the spirituality of the Indigenous nation evades such polarities between the real ad the supra-real. Moreover, if the binary between the colonizing Whites and the disposed Aborigines is apparent in the text, then what is of greater significance is that the narration through Magic Realism of Scott which is projected as an attempt to reclaim the identity of his community by resisting the colonizing ascendancy of the White Australian nation. Thus, the use of Magic Realism opens up the 'liminal' space and becomes one of the "strategies of representation or empowerment … formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable."(Bhabha, 1994, 2)

The very Aboriginal thought process orients around a philosophy whereby the natural meets the supernatural to engender a spiritual continuum. One would well concede with the seven propositions of W.E.H. Stanner (reworked in addresses in 1967 and 1976 and collected by Martin Wilson with his own italics in 1979) with regards to Aboriginal philosophy:

> 1. The Aborigines universally believed that ancestral beings had left a world full of signs of their beneficent intent towards the men they had also brought into being. The wisdom about living given to men, cherished by traditional experience, could interpret these outward and visible signs as saying that men's lives had to follow a perennial pattern and, if they did so, men could always live under an assurance of providence.
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> 2. The human person, compound of body and several spiritual principles or elements, had value in himself and for others, and there were spirits who cared.
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> 3. The main religious cults were concerned to renew and conserve life, including the life-force that kept animating the world in which men subsisted and with which they were bonded in body, soul and spirit.
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> 4. The material part of life, and of man himself, was under spiritual authority, and the souls of the dead shared in maintaining the authority and the providence over them.
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> 5. The core of religious practice was to bring the life of a man under a discipline that required him to understand the sacred tradition of his group and to conform his life to the pattern ordained by tat tradition.
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> 6. The underlying philosophy of religion was one of assent to the received terms of life, that is to say, it inculcated a strong disposition to accept life as a mixture of good with bad, of joy with suffering, but to celebrate it notwithstanding.
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> 7. The major cults inculcated a sense of mystery by symbolisms pointing to ultimate or metaphysical realities which were thought to show themselves by sign.

It is this spirituality which manifests itself in the form of Aboriginal 'Dreamtime'. The intricacies of the concept of 'Dreaming'/'Dreamtime' are well illustrated in a famous passage by Stanner in White Man Got No Dreaming:

> A central meaning of The Dreaming is that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are; but neither 'time' nor 'history' as we understand them is involved in the meaning…
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> Although The Dreaming conjures up the notion of a sacred, heroic time of the indefinitely remote past, such a time is also, in a sense, still part of the present. One cannot 'fix' The Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen…
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> Clearly, The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man…It is a cosmogony, an account of begetting the universe, a study about creation. It is also a cosmology, an account or theory of how that was created became an ordered system. To be more precise, how the universe became a moral system.(1979, 23-24,28)

It is perhaps this innate faith in non non-linear chronology of time and history; the sacred, repetitive, unfixed cyclical convergence of past, present and future; and the cosmogony and cosmology of moral universe that strikes a deep chord in the writings of Scott. Moreover the symbolical manifestation of this spiritual 'Dreamtime' in external palpable visual forms engenders a tradition of supra-logical, supra-rational belief—a mode quite close in its literary presentation to that of post-realist tendency of Magic Realism. Yet, just likeas Aboriginal spirituality even Magic Realism is no uncanny, out-of the world closet surreal experience, with no grounding to the everyday experience:

> Texts labeled magical realist draw upon cultural systems that are no less 'real' than those upon which traditional literary realism draws – often non-Western cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation. Their primary narrative investment may be in myths, legends, ritual – that in collective (sometimes oral and performative, as well as written) practices that bind the community together.(Zamora and Faris, 1995, 3)

But this mode of narration does not only act as a cementing factor for the Nyoongar community in Scott by also helps him to subvert and appropriate the racist discourse of White national ideology of Australia from its traceable beginning to the present day.

It is in True Country, Scott's first published novel, that such Magic Realism was employed to give the feel of a 'true story', a phrase consciously repeated in the novel to differentiate the white documented history from the cautiously preserved world views of the Karnama people. On a very basic level the baseline of the novel is that of a social concern which calls to attention the Aboriginal issues like besetting poverty, drug-abuse, deracination, domestic violence among other concerns. The main protagonist—Bill, a part-Aboriginal school teacher, comes to the Karnama community of Kimberly region of Western Australia in order to explore his Aboriginal heritage. A man who for most part of his life has been brought up with a Euroaustralian cultural orientation, the main character, has been light skinned enough to always have passed as a white man.

If an Aboriginal cultural identity is reinstated and reinvigorated in the novel then that is accomplished through an oral narrative tradition of reclaiming the Aboriginal past; and such oral tradition is moored to a spiritual sense of being in a moral world order. Thus Magic Realism as used in Scott's True Country is not only a cultural belief of the past but such 'Dreamtime' experience is crucial in understanding the inherent Aboriginal truth about one's one self and the community. In an attempt to sing the land and an Aborigine's identity as a matter of difference from White Eurocentric nationist imaginings the use of paranormality becomes one of the essential strategies of subversion and appropriation.

Aboriginal storytelling exemplifies what Mudrooroo terms in The Indigenous Literature of Australia as "Maban reality" or "an acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (1997, 97), a commonplace element that signify not hallucinatory flight of the imagination—an escapist tendency, but a truth beyond the mundane and quotidian appearances. At one point of time in the novel the narrator informs with aplomb in its authenticity that:

> Old days people could make magic. That's true. That's no story, it's true story.
>
> The old people they had a lot of magic in them.
>
> They even fly in the air. Sometimes like a balloon, a bird, like a snake, even just like themselves. (True Country, 68)

The word immediately recalls an oft-quoted line from Jorge Luis Borges and Margarita Guerrero : "In those days the world of mirrors and world of men were not, as they are now, cut off from each other" (The Book of Imaginary Beings, 1974:67-68).Yet such innate faith in past obliquely indicates a hollow and vacuity of the current scenario of Aboriginal Australia— a land made to be bereft of its roots in spirituality through abhorrent pseudo-modern practices such as drug addiction and deracination. Yet the main character is initiated to a new sense of Aboriginal identity by not merely venerating the 'true story' of yore but having imbibed the communal Aboriginal identity through a dream experience of a community Elder's— Walanguh—death:

> Billy saw the old man, fat like a balloon, drifting along in the sunlight, way up above the mango trees and coconut palms. [. . .]
>
> Billy stood among all the people of Karnama, all of them silent and in awe [. . .]. Many were transfixed by the shadow, Walanguh's shadow, which, solid black, skimmed and rippled along the ground while the old man, naked and shameless, his penis shrivelled below his swollen belly, grinned and waved at those few who turned their eyes up to him. (True Country, 147)

What is immediately called into the reader's literary mindscape is García Márquez's short story, A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings. What is important is that the note struck at this point of time is far from being elegiac, rather it generates a sense of belonging, a communal solidarity—a formulation towards a true country through its true story. The image of flight— a key ingredient of Magic Realism, variously scattered throughout the story finds its culminating proportion in the end where Bill had either died through drowning or had a near death experience:

> Billy in a blue sky, clouds cobwebbing his vision, sun on his back, the air sharp, the shadow of clouds gliding across the scrubby ground below. [. . .] And he knew who he was, he recognised the land below him. The river snaking across burnt earth sprouting bits of green, that pool in the bend of the river, the green mission ground, the cross of the airstrip . . .
>
> The rain spat in the window, onto his face.
>
> I felt it.
>
> See? Now it is done. Now you know. True country. Because just living, just living is going downward lost drifting nowhere, no matter if you be skitter-scatter dancing anykind [sic] like mad. We gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place little bit new, little bit special, all the time.
>
> We are serious. We are grinning. Welcome to you. (True Country, 254-55)

The image of flight, though apparently credited to be that of a modern realist one in an aircraft is yet but one which 'mimics' the same through its involving of mythic Aboriginal 'Dreamtime' narration. Bill's death and the consequent soaring flight that helps him identify with the dead Walanguh symbolizes a doffing away with the brunt of his white identity and attempts in a retelling of a nation from the perspective of the Aborigine's 'Dreamtime' story. Thus Magic Realism used in True Country is a strategically planned technique to counter the White power structure at the level of discourse so that it delivers an unsettling shock to the habitual acceptance of canonical Western standards—whether of the genre or of the principle of nation building. Further Magic Realism often shifts focus from the text to the reader, engaging the reader's consciousness to the act of reading. The writing holds up a mirror to the reader caught in the act of reading. This self-consciousness is well described by Jon Thien, in his essay The Textualization of the Reader in Magical Realist Fiction. Scott's open welcome to all the readers through a plural voice ("We") is a non-oblique gesture towards national reconciliation based on the moral principle and spiritual gift of Aborigines.3 Unlike the monologic White Australia and its 'Colonial nationalism, which is born of the desire to assert difference from the imperial centre' something that 'inevitably calcifies into an authoritative discourse which replaces the one it appears to be rejecting' (Bill Ashcroft and John Salter,71), the Aboriginal concept of nation is one of tolerance and yet every time narrating it after a fashion which is special in the remembrance of its spiritual tradition and true acknowledgement of things past and an onward movement towards the future rather than being museumized as the 'Other'— the primitive savage. At the end, regarding the use of Magic(al) Realism, a defamiliarizing technique, by Kim Scott in True Country we can well contend with Glender and Jacobs that:

> The nation (Australia) becomes unfamiliar to itself precisely because of the post-colonial condition in which an indigenous (sic.) population is increasingly able not just to "write back" but to produce a range of special effects, which can be unsettling right across the board. (1985, 135)

Notes

1. Interview of Kim Scott by K. Kunhikrishnan."Literary Review" in The Hindu.Sunday, Apr 06, 2003.

2. The terms Ontological Magic Realism, as distinguished from Epistemological Magic Realism, were coined by Roberto González Echevarriá in 1974. The former term suggests a relying on a tradition and culture of belief in

magical element and a philosophical study of the same; while the later pertains to that of knowledge.

3. See Richard Pascal. 'Singing Our Place Little Bit New: Aboriginal Narrativity and Nation Building in Kim Scott's True Country' in Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction Vol.46, Issue 1. (2004).

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