

AMALGAMATION OF FANTASY AND REALITY IN LAURA RESTREPO'S *THE DARK BRIDE* (READING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MAGIC REALISM)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is the extensive analysis of Laura Restrepo's fiction The Dark Bride from the perspective of Magic realism. In the novel the writer amalgamates the real and fantasies in such a way that it blurs the border between history and fiction. There is no demarcation between the past and present in it. This amalgamation of real and fantasy is reflected in the portrayal of characters, settings and the incidents of the novel. By using the technique of magic realism, Restrepo has re-narrated the Columbian history in a fictionalized form. In the novel, the main character Amanda is presented as a traumatized character who hides her real identity at first and pretends as a girl. She arrives at La-Catunga to make her new identity by engaging in prostitution. She renames herself "Sayonara", which in Japanese means "good-bye". So symbolically it is a farewell to her traumatic past. The personal story of Sayonara in the novel is embedded with the history of 1940s of the Columbia. By using the technique of re-narrating, the writer presents the voice of marginalized and colonized ones. As a qualitative research, the researcher has used the text as a source of primary data and analyzed it with the theoretical tool of magic realism.

Key Words: Magic realism, history, fantasy, past trauma,

1. INTRODUCTION

Laura Restrepo, the bestselling author and political activist, was born in Bogota, Columbia, in 1950. She is also a journalist and she has been a professor of literature at the National University of Columbia. Her best works was *Delerio* (2004), a novel winning the prestigious Alfaguara award. Most of her works are based on the investigation between fantasy and real. The novel *The Dark Bride* (1991) reflects the real settings and incidence with fantastical elements.

The novel *The Dark Bride* was first published in Spanish with the title "La Novia Oscura". Later it is translated into English by Stephen A. Lytle. The writer presents the post-colonial tyrannical Colombian politics around 1940s. She presents the hunger, suffering and melancholy of silenced and marginalized ones. The novel starts with the arrival of the mysterious girl Sayonara in La Catunga and ends with the departure of her with the hallucinated figure of the Payanes to whom she loves.

The plot of the novel *The Dark Bride* begins with a journey of Sayonara to become a prostitute toward La Catunga, a city in Colombian forest. By taking the training by Todos Los Santos, she

got success in winning the hearts of all there. She tries to forget her past, and wants to make the world of her own. Forgetting the past, she tries to move for the future but the memory haunts her time and again. The other characters, like Matilda, Sacramento, Emiliano are also suffered there in different ways. In the town La Catunga, prostitutes arrive from different societies. The illegal children of whites; and poor girls came there in the market of prostitution for their survival. So, the town is a hybrid city of prostitutes who came there for their survival. The bastard male children became the refinery workers of Tropical Oil Company, an American Oil Company there. They are exploited with the heavy loads of work there. Sacramento, a worker of the company, brings Sayonara to La Catunga; and falls in love with her.

One day Sayonara goes against the unwritten rules of prostitution and falls in love with a man, Payanes. This love triangle goes ahead in parallel with a strike at the oil fields. The workers of Tropical Oil Company started their strike because they are inhumanly treated. Only cold rice balls and water as a lunch were given to them. But, North Americans are holding the top positions of the company. They have the hot, healthy foods like eggs and milk, fruits and vegetables. The strike is also supported by the prostitutes. The strike came to the end by bribing the leader. Frank Brasco, a supporter of colonizers of a high rank post in the company, takes a side of the colonized people. Thus in *The Dark Bride*, Restrepo succeeds in giving voice to the colonized.

The novel seems as a story of a mysterious girl, Sayonara. But the writer, in deep level; projects the real story of Columbia during 1940s. But the question is why and how the writer uses the technique of magic realism in her novel *The Dark Bride*; is major objective to investigate in the analysis of the fiction. The writer's use of the technique of magic realism for the recognition of the voice of silenced and marginalized was the objective of this research.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

After the publication and translation into English, this Novel became a hot cake for the critics. Many critics analyze the novel by using different perspectives. One of the critics Martha Lorena Rubi states, "Her mission is to narrate her country's reality in fictional form while keeping the reality alive she compels us to read between the lines" (155). It means *The Dark Bride* is the reality of Columbian history in a fictional form. Another critic Martin (2008) posits:

"La novia oscura' (The Dark Bride) is concerned with the new cultural identities created by changing configurations of wealth in Colombia in the 1940s, specifically with those new communities formed around flows of capital from North America in the creation of an oil industry in the north-east of the country. (113)

The novel, La Novia Oscura which is translated in English as The Dark Bride is based on a real settings and incidence of Columbia and hints magic realism in the novel. Davies (2007) sates:

What we find in the historical sweep of La Novia Oscura is an important magical realist feature: the articulate superposition of whole layers of the past within the present, ranging from Indian or pre- Colombian realities to U.S. economic intervention which introduced foreign customs and cultural discontinuities. (1037)

The novel presents the activities of the US Company, the Tropical Oil Company, which exploits Colombian oil reserves in 1916, and of the oil workers' strike of 1948. The portrayal of these realities makes the novel a magic realist text.

The writer presents the reality of Columbia not as a traditional history, but as the experience of ordinary people from different backgrounds - the women, the prostitute, and the workers. It is the unique reality of Latin America as it was colonized by the USA. So, Restrepo uses the technique of magic realism to reflect the voice of marginalized and exploited Colombians.

The above critics have explored *The Dark Bride* as a novel based on reality. But the research paper is focused on how the writer uses the technique of magic realism in the novel. It also

aimed to show how the writer has re-narrated the history of Colombia.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Magic realism, as a genre, has certain characteristics like amalgamation of real with fantasy, sense of mystery, real-history-world setting, trauma and memory, post colonial political critique etc. In magic, there is the creation of imaginary world and the reality is distorted but magic in magic realism is different compared to those sorts of magic. In Magic Realism Maggie Ann Bower also writes, "... in magic realism 'magic' refers to the mystery of life"(19). Leal (1995) also says that magic realism is "not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of mysterious relationship between man and his circumstance" (122).

The theorist Leal (1995) says:

Unlike surrealism, magical realism doesn't use dream motifs; neither does it distort reality, or create imaginary world, as writers of fantastic literature or science fiction..... Magic realism is not a magic either. Its aim, unlike that of magic, is to express emotions not to evoke them. Magic realism is more than anything else, an attitude towards reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured form, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structure. In magic realism, writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts (324).

So, Magic realism is neither magic nor a supernatural story. In her book *Magic(al) Realism*, Maggie Bowers (2013) says, "the history of magic(al) realism, that is, of the related terms of magic realism, magical realism and marvelous realism, is a complicated story spanning eight decades with three principal turning points and many characters. These eight decades of magic realism has been topographically divided into three periods. The first period is set in Germany in the 1920s, the second period in Central America in the 1940s and the third period, beginning in 1955 in Latin America" (7).

However, most of the magic realist text is set in a postcolonial context and written from a postcolonial perspective that challenges the assumption of an authoritative colonialist attitude. The post-colonial literary critic Slemon (1995) defines the term Magic realism as "an oxymoron, one that suggest a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy" (409). Further he says it is a mixture of postmodernist assumptions to claim that magical realism is able to express a number of postcolonial elements.

Similarly, Baker (1991) also opines that, "Postcolonial literature not only attacks colonial attitudes, but also seeks for alternative positions for the indigenes to occupy. (55). Bowers (2013) also observes "the appropriateness of magic realism in relation to post-colonialism" (6). Hegerfeldt (2002) also opines, "Magic realism can and should be regarded as a postcolonial mode insofar as it pursues as essentially post-colonial project" (81).

Similarly Zamora and Faris (1995) claims that in magic realist works, "history is Inscribed" (6) and writes magic realism as "a mode suited to exploring - and transgressing - boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic" (5). Magic realist literature tends to read at an intensified level. The reader must let go of preexisting ties to conventional exposition, plot progression, linear time structure, and scientific reason etc. to strive for a state of heightened awareness of life's connectedness or hidden meanings.

The critic Faris (1995) even states that in magic realism, the "sense of time is shaken throughout" the text and "Repetition as a narrative principle, in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues used symbolically or structurally, creates a magic of shifting references" (173). As the novel *The Dark Bride* is based on a real story told by many voices, it is fragmented and it distorts the border of time and space which is a characteristic of magic realist texts.

Young (1995) points out that the origins of post colonialism lie in the "historical resistance to

colonial occupation and imperial control" (4). And several critic notes the postcolonial issues are better dealt with the technique of magic realism. As many writers may not directly address the issue of post colonialism, they express their reveal through political issues through magic realism technique. In this context Boehmer (1995) claims that:

Drawing on the special effects of magical realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a word distorted and made incredible by cultural displacement [...] they 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. (235)

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The novel starts with the magic realist settings. It is based the historical fact The setting, La Catunga is the old native name for Barrancabermeja, located on the banks of the River Magdalena, north of Medellin. The real setting is represented by Restrepo in such a way that it becomes fantasy because to be a prostitute and to be a son of prostitute in any place is not considered as a normal thing. Thus there is a juxtaposition of reality and fantasy which makes it magic realism.

In the novel, Restrepo starts the story as a narrator through the flashbacks of the characters especially of the God mother Todos Los Santos and Sacramento. Todos Los Santos recalls the journey of Sayonara from her arrival in La Catunga as a disheveled girl to her rise as queen of prostitutes. The reign as a barrio angel and her unprecedented fall; all these are said by Todos Los Santos to the narrator. Through the narrator, Restrepo succeeds to take the readers into flashbacks through the technique of magic realism.

The novel *The Dark Bride* is based on a realistic investigation, which is one of the major features of magic realist text. She transforms her investigation into the foundation for a fictional creation. She has created fictional but magical protagonist Sayonara:

When Sacramento appeared at her house with the aspiring prostitute, just one look at the wild and disheveled creature standing in front of her, half challenging and half imploring, was enough for her to recognize in the girl that singular mixture of helplessness and arrogance that fueled male desire better than any aphrodisiac. (12)

This shows the use of elements of magic realism. Here, the writer transforms an ordinary girl to an mysterious Sayonara. She treats her as an angel in La Catunga who can hypnotize anyone across her way. Here in the novel Restrepo inflates the mundane with exaggerations into fantastic which is one of the elements of magic realism.

When Sayonara first arrives in La Catunga, she is hardly of thirteen, a skinny creature with the face covered by a tangle of wild, dirty hair. When she demands the cart driver Sacramento to take her to the most famous bar -the Dancing Miramar, he gets intrigued with doubts as he thinks why this tiny girl wants to go to that bar. His doubts die out without much ado as she says, "I want to be a puta (prostitute)" (6). The young girl doesn't share anything about her in the beginning. She is no friend of commentary or gossip; she maintains her silence about her past which makes one to think of the painful or guilt-ridden reasons that cause her to hide it. It makes one to think of enormity of vault that is inside her. And Restrepo succeeds to heighten this mystery so that a reader gets curious about it:

When they asked her where you were born, what is your name, how old are you, she slipped with non-answers into silent void of memories or sometime just the opposite, she would overflow with words, filling the house with mindless chatter that was even more concealing than her muteness. (29)

Todos Los Santos, when sees Sayonara for the first time, she feels her own cyclic history that

distorts the border of time and space in the novel. Todos Los Santos feels her youth in haughty Sayonara. And after living together for two years, everything that Sayonara she learns from her madrina:

She echoed her madrina's expressions, had the same deep gaze, the identical habit of walking around barefoot and of curing illness with infusions of parsley. She had even inherited the peculiar style of cleaning her teeth, scrubbing so hard that the brush barely lasted a month.... In her steps I found my own footprint and in her mirror I could read the same traces of my youth. (68)

Then, Sacramento's story is different. String of regret never leaves him; he is drowned in weight of guilt of driving the girl to the land of prostitutes. At that time, Sacramento is just a boy and Sayonara a girl; she is even not named as Sayonara. And they grow playing together and get affectionate to each other. A kind of love grows between them. But a thread of guilt never leaves him, so guilt-ridden Sacramento leaves La Catunga to be *apetrolero* (an oil worker), and the same day his girl is named as Sayonara which means good bye in Japanese.

In the novel, the workers of Tropical Oil Company are the real epitome of Columbia. They are given balls of cold rice to eat which make them revolt against the company and raise the rice strike to demand their rights. As the workers are made out to work hard and in lunch, they are only given the brown sugar in hot water and rice balls while the North Americans holding the top positions are given eggs and milk, and fruits and vegetables, hot and healthy foods. The workers statement like "we are fed up with this shitty food" and the sentence in the novel, "the men's eyes were the announcement of the arrival of the great rebellion" (212) are sufficient for the readers to predict how rice strike got started. Payanes who is also a worker on the company feels like demanding repayment from life for all the hardships and pettiness he has to endure, and technique. The workers to make their demands fulfill, captures the North American *Brasco*, who holds the top position in Tropical Oil Company. As the company knows how to use the contentment to divide them, so it begins to offer promotions, bonuses, and privileges for those who returns to work ignoring the union authority and a free house for the workers who starts a family. So Sacramento too keeps himself in the list of candidates for subsidizing house.

In *The Dark Bride*, rice strike represents a criticism of the elite society of the Americans in Colombia. The novel tells a story of common people breaking the discourse of privileged centers of literature. This makes the novel to be a magic realist text. Besides like Zamora and Faris (1995) say, real Colombian history is inscribed in the novel which again makes the novel as magic realist text. The company workers demand nothing more than basic living standards: decent, good-quality rice, a portion of meat or vegetable, potable water in the camp, clothes-washing facilities near the barracks, a section in the cemetery in Tora, a sufficient number of latrines from their employers, but are soundly ignored.

With the strike, the narrator bit by bit unfolds identity of Sayonara and her past. Sayonara is the eldest daughter of Matilda who is a Guhaiba Indian who is captured by Abelardo who is a white from America. Even without marrying Matilda, Abelardo becomes father of six children from Matilda, the Eldest being a son named Emiliano:

Meet isn't the appropriate word. Let's say instead that he captured her in one of those hunting expeditions that the white colonists organized in the eastern plains. It wasn't vermin that they downed with their rifles or even mountain birds, but sometimes those too. It meant to shoot at Guhaiba Indians, chasing them over the immense flatlands that offered no refuge, because between the bullet and the Indians there wasn't a single tree to hide. (150)

Here what Restrepo wants to portrait is that mother Matilda represents the whole Colombia and Abelardo represents the colonizers who exploit naturally resourceful native Colombia. Abelardo abuses Matilda, makes her to work for him and compels her to entertain him. Likewise Americans abuse Colombians, make them work for them and exploit the oil reserves leaving

everything empty. Among the elementary issues treated by postcolonial studies are state violence, the exploitation of people and environment by transnational corporations, and social disempowerment often determined by race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality are some of the elementary issues dealt by post-colonialism studies. All these issues are noticeable in *The Dark Bride*.

Sacramento remains tormented with the love for Sayonara. He misses her a lot and starts sending postcard to Sayonara. What he can do is all that to talk to his friend Payanes about his feelings for Sayonara. One day, Sacramento, as he is ill, sends his friend Payanes to La Catunga with money for Sayonara and a message that he wants to marry her. But things go opposite, Payanes and Sayonara fall in love and that they make promise to meet at the Shore of Magdalena River on last Friday of every month. But for prostitutes, promises are sacred and they are forbidden.

When he turns eighteen, Emiliano is caught in an army round up and is enlisted as recruit in the third brigade. But when the seniors humiliate Emiliano by saying son of savage and cheetah, he confronts with them and hits the sergeant's face with a powerful punch. As a punishment, they take his clothes and bury him in a jail they call the tomb in the ground. They reprimand him by saying "You're going to rot there, monkey, savage, humanoid, shouted the sergeant from above as he passed Emiliano, and so did other officers, spitting on him and insulting him" (153).

In that hole of death, Emiliano wallow in dementia and his own excrement. He manages to survive for forty-six days, stolen minute by minute from horror and death. And one night, he cuts his vein with a piece of glass and bleeds to death. And when this news reaches to Matilda, she runs to the brigade with a gallon of kerosene and sets fire to burn herself to death there in front of the military brigade:

Her hair was the first to burn, that sumptuous blue-black mantle that had been only excess; it glowed red-white like a torch against the innocence of the sky until her lean body of dry wood was engulfed in flames. Her eyeballs melted and intense fire of a mother's mourning began and the combustion of her infinite pain that wasn't of her flesh followed. (154)

It traumatizes Sayonara as much as it traumatizes Ambalema as hitherto no human has died there in this way. After this incident, Abelardo marries another white woman and he abandons the daughters of Matilda. These all incidents represent the traumatic experiences of Sayonara and that of whole Colombia during the colonization.

This is how Sayonara gets new identity leaving behind the old memories of Amanda. Restrepo here tries to show "will-to-forget" the traumatic memory and colonial past forming a new identity. And this Restrepo's trauma narrative device makes the novel *The Dark Bride* as a magical realism text for rendering traumatic experience and memories. The narrator learns that the death of Emiliano in military custody followed by the self-immolation of Matilda has shaken the town. The way Matilda died moves the town so much that she is remembered as a holy martyr and people pay floral tributes until the army builds sentry box at spot where Matilda burns herself. They are up to building a monument at that spot if the army men have not built the sentry box. According to Mervis (1998), by employing the mode of magic realism 'individual stories becomes a part of communal myths' and enable writers to 'confront harsh and socio-political realities' (52). Here also the Sayonara's family story becomes a part of 'communal myths', which is one of the characteristics of magic realism. So in one way Sayonara's family tragedy can be reflected as collective trauma.

In the novel, there are other characters too who have traumatic experiences. Sacramento has traumatic experience. His mother leaves him in his infancy and travels to the coast to settle accounts with a man who deserts her but she never comes back to Sacramento. In his infancy, he is raised from house to house and from one woman's arm to another's. Restrepo reveals the flashbacks to the past and the memory work to be at times painful and difficult for her respondents in the course of her investigations. When Ana (sister of Sayonara) leaves La

Catunga with the white General Deebemetrio del Valle, commander in chief of Tora's campaign, Sayonara again feels victimized. She goes to Ana to bring her back but she denies returning back as del Valle pays for her English and dress making lessons, he gives her a television, a record player, and a collection of LPs, brings her marzipan fruits and bottles of wines. Sayonara feels pain as these incident reminds her of her family tragedy.

When Sayonara asks Ana if she had forgotten the wrongs the military has done to her family, to the peoples of Tora, and then she replies, "I haven't forgotten and sometimes the anger makes my blood boil and I see red, and at those times I hate del Valle and want to strangle him with my bare hands. Thus the writer's ability to provide the historical chronicle moments in the novel reflects on the real events of Country which is one of the characteristic of magic realism. The novel as a whole tells the history of Columbia from a critical perspective through the technique of magic realism.

With the end of strike, Sayonara marries with the Sacramento as her love at the end is rejected by the Payanes. She thinks to start a new life with her real name Amanda. In most of the society, men is usually taken as the dynamic whole that controls the society and are expected it defend their so called superiority through performing major jobs while women are taken as the passive second class citizens unable to take their destiny in their own hands and obeying their husband, because she has to go everywhere her husband takes her with. Amanda here also has to go wherever her husband is heading to and has to do in the way her husband wants to.

This reminds us of vitiating the role of women. Amanda tries her best to change herself according to her husband, but he always keeps complaining. So she feels a kind of domination by her husband. Finally she leaves him and returns to the La-Tora again. This shows a strong move of a female to take her own decision. In one hand, Restrepo depicts the border problem that exists in the society, while at the same time she raises the voice of female by revolting against the patriarchal society. It is the moment of magical realism that allows achieving new identities and breaking out the culture which has ruled the marginalized one for so long.

This imagined realm attempts to question the myth that is traditionally hegemonic and it also attempts to invert the social orders of society where patriarchal norms are prioritized. Similarly the description of the wounded heart of Jesus in the novel also depicts the Christian myth.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the writer presents the reality fusing with mystery, superstition, myth and history. These amalgamations of reality with fantasy, trauma and memory are the issues of post-colonial political issues. The novel *The Dark Bride* is the text of a magic realism with the admixture. *The Dark Bride* has recreated history and also questions over those historical facts of the official versions of history. If we observe back the history of Columbia, in 1919 the New Jersey-based Tropical Oil Company signed a contract with the government that entitled the firm to exploit Colombian petroleum reserves for 30 years. For that reason, it was as the result of post-colonialism. During that time, the military helped Tropical Oil suppress its workers and brutally defuse strike actions. So, Restrepo in the novel *The Dark Bride* presents these real, social and historical events of Columbia in a fictional form through the technique of magic realism.

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