

## Ontological Magic Realism of Saedi's "Trepidation"

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**Abstract.** Magic Realism which mostly is identified with Latin American fictions of 1960s has taken a journey which started from Germany, travelled to Spain and then Latin America and is still continuing its journey to other parts of the world. Though magic realism's location was considered in postcolonial countries, its appearance in non-colonized countries has proved vice versa. It also found its way in Persian fiction, too. Being divided to epistemological and ontological, from Roberto González Echevarría's view, in this paper we intend to show the ontological magic realism of an Iranian writer, Gholam-Hossein Saedi's short story "Trepidation".

**Keywords:** Magic Realism, Ontological Magic Realism, Gholam-Hossein Saedi, "Trepidation"

### 1. Introduction

Magic Realism, a juxtaposition of two opposite modes in literature discovers realist elements overwhelmed with unexplainable events. It mostly is identified with Latin American fictions of 1960s. Nonetheless, the term has taken a journey which started from Germany, travelled to Spain and then Latin America and it is still continuing its journey to other parts of the world. Though it was thought that as a movement in literature, magic realism's location is in postcolonial countries, its appearance in non-colonized countries has proved vice versa. Magic realism has found its way in Iranian fiction in 20th C., too. But we should admit that it has existed in Persian literature at least since twelve C. by Attar Neishabori's mythical works. As magic realism has been divided to epistemological and ontological, from Roberto González Echevarría's view, in this paper we intend to show the ontological magic realism of an Iranian writer, Gholam-Hossein Saedi's short story "Trepidation".

### 2. Magic Realism

Magic Realism in its best definition is "an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy", from Stephen Slemon's view. (p.10) In a magic realist text fantastic events happen as a part of everyday life.

Magic realism is as old as 18<sup>th</sup> C. in German philosophy when Novalis used "magical idealist" and "magical realist", as Irene Guenther mentions. Meanwhile, the term was first introduced by Franz Roh, German painter. However, Kenneth Reeds states that there is no evidence whether Roh was influenced by Novalis, "but the philosopher's notion is useful as a starting point because it contained the amalgamation of two key elements: realism (ordinary phenomena) and magic." Roh used magic realism to express post expressionist painting, a return to realism. Even the title of his notable essay is "Magic Realism: Post Expressionism". In the editor's note we read that he used the word "magic" as opposed to "mystic". (p.15) But Irene Guenther believes that Roh "never gave a concise definition of magic realism" (p.34).

Roh's essay was translated to Spanish at the same year and was published in Madrid in 1929 under the title *Revista De Occidente* by Jose Ortega Gasset. Latin America became familiar with magic realism

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through the translation of *Revista De Occidente*. The term was forgotten but in 1960s it reappears. After the appearance of Angel Flores' article on magical realism in 1955, Amaryll Chanady believes, "it became a concept in literary criticism". (p.17) Guenther states that in Latin America "the concept was primarily seized by literary critic and was, through translation and literary appropriation, transformed." (p.61) The transformation makes Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier call this experience "le real maravilloso americano" the affinity between real and the imaginary in Latin America. Amaryll Chanady refers that "Carpentier also used the concept of the marvelous real as a maker of difference in a Latin American discourse of identify rejecting European influence." (p.137) Wendy B. Faris in a very excellent way exemplifies magical realism with Caliban "now something of an icon of new world, or postcolonial, writing, who learns the master's language, then uses it to curse. Magical realism has mastered the European discourse of realism and now uses it not to curse, exactly, but to undermine some of its master's assumptions." (p.28) But the way that magic realism like Caliban is undermining his European master's assumption is through entering the unreal events in realism as if it is a part of it. Magic realism parodies realism.

One cannot deny the Latin American writers' significant role in "developing the critical concept of magical realism and are still primary voices in its discussion" however magic realism is changing to "an international commodity", to use Zamora and Faris term. (p.2) At the same time according to Faris and Zamora magic realism is alive in postcolonial contexts and is "now achieving a compensatory extension of its market worldwide". (p.2)

### **3. Saedi and his "Trepidation"**

Gholam-Hossein Saedi(1936-1985), a psychiatrist, is an Iranian Azeri writer. He published more than 40 books in genres of fiction, drama, novel, screenplay, and short story along with cultural criticism, travel literature, and ethnography. He spent his later years of life as a writer in exile in Paris.

"Trepidation", a short story by Saedi, has its setting in a rustic area in South of Iran near Persian Gulf. Getting up late in midday, Salem Ahmad notices a quick movement of a shadow in his yard. He finds the door of his guest room half open. Looking from the window, Salem Ahmad sees a tall "black" with a small head sitting near the fire and making coffee for himself. He wanted to go to the sea but as soon as he sees the tall "black" he runs away to the village. He goes to Saleh's house saying that "I was bedeviled." (p.3), asks his help. Salem Ahmad explains the things he had seen and starts trembling. Then, Saleh shouts "La Elahe el Allah, Mohamadan Rasoul Allah" (p.5). People in the village think that somebody passed away and come out of their houses. When people gather around sheriff's house, sheriff says that "we can do nothing. Let's ask the Sufi's help."(p.6) While Salem Ahmad was lying on the ground, the Sufi says that "we should wait for the night to come and nobody should become afraid."(p.7) At night after people say their prayers in the mosque they start playing the drums. They play the drums till morning. In the morning the tall "black" walking with two walking sticks comes out of the house. People shout together, "leave our village" and the tall "black" responds, "Help me, I want bread, I want fish, I want date, I want rice, cheese" (p.11). People are afraid of him and as he is walking towards them they move backwards. They ask the Sufi whether it is a sin to kill him. The Sufi says "if he is a harmful one we can kill him. If he is killed here, in another part of the world he will appear. They never leave the world". (p.12) As soon as the tall "black" comes close they find that there is no up and down on his face. His face was flat. The Sufi takes a piece of stone and says, "With the permission of Allah and His prophet" (p.61). He throws the stone and people start doing that. After three days Salem Ahmad becomes worse and worse. He runs around the houses shouting. They bring rope and tie it around him and carry him to the door of the mosque. The Sufi suggests taking Salem Ahmad to the pile of stones. There, Salem Ahmad feels well and thinks that a kind voice is calling him from the sea.

### **4. Discussion: Ontological Magic Realism in "Trepidation"**

Magic realism-in terms of Flores-"amalgamation of realism and fantasy", is divided to epistemological and ontological ones (p.112). Roberto González Echevarría divides Magical realism to the mentioned types. Faris quoting "Jean Weisgerber states that there is a similar distinction between two types of magical realism: the "scholarly" type, which "loses itself in art and conjecture to illuminate or construct a speculative

universe,” and which is mainly the province of European writers, and the mythic or folkloric type, found mainly in Latin America.”(p.27) Meanwhile, Faris using Roberto González Echevarría’s view expresses that scholarly and mythic magic realism coincide with epistemological and ontological magic realism. He explains that the epistemological magic realism stems from the “observer’s vision” while in the ontological America is considered to be itself marvelous (Alejo Carpentier’s “lo real maravilloso”[the marvelous real]). (p.27)

Scholarly or epistemology magical realism is not the purpose of our study whereas mythic or ontological magical realism is the thing we observe. We can study ontological magic realism in two levels, the location and the culture. The place is where magical realism located. We may associate this with what Alejo Carpentier’s “lo real maravilloso”[the marvelous real] that America is considered to be itself marvelous”, as it was mentioned above. (p.27)

First the location: In the stories with the style of magical realism in Iran, south of Iran the location around the Persian Gulf is where magical realist stories take place. Moniro Ravanipour’s novels and short stories with the theme of magical realism like “The Drowned” happen there. As she is from South of Iran she is familiar with the folklore or mythic of the neighborhood. Saedi was from Azerbaijan of Iran, far from south but he spent years in south to become familiar with the customs and the culture of the people there.

Second, the mythic or folklore: for this we can refer to the appearance of the tall black with a small flat face. It is a creature which makes people enchanted. There is no sign of beauty on this creature. He is thin, black, has one leg and a wooden leg, and an ugly face. He is deformed. Alejo Carpentier believes that “ugliness, deformity, all that is terrible can also be marvelous. All that is strange is marvelous.” (p.102)

As there is no image of the women in the story, all men are afraid of the tall “black”. Salem Ahmad by seeing the tall “black” becomes enchanted. Even like a mad runs over the village. When Saleh hears about the tall “black” and later the Sufi and the people of the village nobody surprises only they become terrified, “fantastic events occur on a routine base” here, to use Booker’s idea. (p.482) Faris and Zamora state that in magic realist texts supernatural- like the appearance of the tall “black” in our story- is not a “simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence, admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing. It is a simple matter of most complicated sort.” (p.3)

The setting of the story is a village in south of Iran near Persian Gulf. Salem Ahmad is an ordinary man who gets up late to do his tasks. Actually the story has its realist style. Although the tall black in the story is the element of magic, its characteristics are not unusual for a reader. In the beginning of the story he is seen making coffee for himself while he is wearing “Dashdashe”, a white long gown that men in Arabian countries and around Persian Gulf wear. The narrator gives the attributes of ordinary person to him like Amaryll Chanady view that in magical realism “the figure of the devil is introduced as casually as it were that of a human being” (p.113) People’s confrontation with it is as if they have confronted it before or it is a part of their life which happens sometimes. People know that they should not become near the tall “black” because it will enchant them. These things cannot be evaluated within the western ideologies of culture. Scot Simpkins quoting Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria expresses the magic realist text does not “depend either on natural or physical laws or on the usual conception of the real in western culture” because it is “a narrative ...in which the relation between incidents, characters, and setting could not be based upon or justified by their status within the physical world or their normal acceptance by bourgeois mentality.” (p.146)

Like other magical realist stories, the ending of the story is unclear. We only guess that after Sufi’s permission people take stones and start stoning the tall “black”. There is a pile of stone in the seaside which people take Salem Ahmad at the end of the story so that he gets rid of bedevilment. There, Salem Ahmad feels better. But we don’t know why he feels well or what has happened to the tall “black” Amaryll Chanady in her discussion on authorial reticence in magical realism and fantastic states that “a mystery which is left unexplained incites the reader to resolve it himself”. (p.121)

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