Off-Centring the Real in Postcolonial Fiction

Arijana Luburić-Cvijanović, University of Novi Sad, Serbia

Keywords: Gothic, magical realism, postcolonial fiction, real, realism, science fiction

Mots clés : Gothique, réalisme magique, fiction postcoloniale, le réel, réalisme, science-fiction

> The ground was right now not the ground, and the sky was not the sky, and lie was truth and truth was a shifting, slithering thing.
>
> Marlon James, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (2019)

The colonial and postcolonial real: a fragile balance

In her comprehensive study of colonialism, postcolonialism, and textuality, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, Elleke Boehmer reminds us of the close connection between Empire and the text. Empire was "represented by texts" and was itself "a textual exercise" (Boehmer 14). From official reports to personal diaries and travel writing, from scientific and newspaper articles to works of fiction, Empire was "expressed textually" (Boehmer 14). Even if it may appear a little outdated in view of the current preference in critical and theoretical analyses for the latest theories, Edward Said's 1978 exploration of Empire's textual practices is invaluable here for its unsurpassed explanation of the role of text in the colonial project. Closely related to the cultural aspect of colonialism, "the so-called truthful text" as well as "the avowedly artistic (i.e. openly imaginative) text" (Said 21) served to disseminate colonial ideology by producing and imposing colonial representations of the world. Said elucidates in book-length detail that while ostensibly compiling and transmitting knowledge of the Orient or, by extension, any other colonised space, the colonial text systematically created an

inferior phantasmal world, rationalising and justifying colonial rule. The colonial text offered fictional representations of a non-existent world that was constructed by means of "verbal 'image-making'" (Cobley 57) dictated by the existing power relations and the prevailing standards of the centre. The language of the colonial text was, therefore, designed to articulate Empire's interpretations of subordinate worlds rather than their realities:

> [W]e need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate. What it is trying to do, as Dante tried to do in the *Inferno*, is… to characterize the Orient as alien… (Said 71-72)

To achieve this, colonial texts, whose production partly coincided with the dominance of realist representations in European literatures, went well beyond the real and were closer to medieval fabulation than to literary and artistic realism or scientific objectivity.

Written by both visitors in colonised territories and those who only imagined them, colonial texts were similar in their world-creating strategies to *Imagines mundi*. These encyclopaedias fed into the need for the miraculous by imagining and describing distant lands from frequently uninformed perspectives, confirming the precedence of symbolic representations over empirical ones (Eco). The effect in either case was a blurred boundary between truth and falsehood as realities were overlaid by constructions of the real. From a long historical perspective, Umberto Eco's essay on the power of falsehood considers a tendency throughout human history to collapse the border between the real and the unreal, and provides numerous examples of false beliefs that were the driving forces of history. Yet, while attempting to highlight the porousness of the truth/lie dichotomy, Eco cites beliefs that were not intended to cause harm. Contrary to them, colonial texts overwhelmed the reader with deliberate misrepresentations that promoted the colonial ideology. Even in the first half of the twentieth century, which witnessed a greater recognition of cultures outside Europe and the emergence of "European expressions of self-doubt," the nineteenth-century world-picture was for the most part undisturbed and "European sovereignty remained largely unquestioned, as did the cultural authority of the West" (Boehmer 133).

Because colonial writing admitted of no perspective other than its own—Western, European, white, and predominantly male—from its beginnings, postcolonial literature

was driven by an urge to redefine the formerly colonised world by representing it from heterogeneous indigenous points of view. In other words, the oppressive textual practices of Empire, with consequences that reached far beyond matters of textuality, inspired a revisionary tendency that came to define early postcolonial writing. It restored fragments of lost histories, cultures, and voices, and dethroned the colonial real by offering fresh, because formerly unavailable, perspectives on colonised realities. Images of uniformly primitive societies with little or no history, culture, or social and political organisation were replaced by portrayals of rich, long-standing indigenous traditions, social and political hierarchies, and individualised characters. Admittedly, nativist postcolonial writing was at times predisposed to nostalgia and romanticisation, sometimes well before the period of decolonisation, which Solomon Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930) illustrates in its employment of "a nostalgic-romance mode to suggest that an inclusive, supra-tribal form of nationalism should prevail in southern Africa" (Walder 58). However, works by writers like Chinua Achebe assume a realistic approach to society to celebrate African histories and cultures without ignoring inner divisions, patriarchal oppression, or the economic disparity between urban and rural areas. Irrespective of their approach, early postcolonial responses to colonial representations expressed a preference for realism. However, it was not realism of the purely rational and linear kind that came to dominate European literatures since the Enlightenment. It was a more inclusive brand of realism in which the real encompassed the worlds of myth, legend, and indigenous religions. Revived to assert the existence, value, and richness of precolonial cultures, and positive cultural difference, those traditions and their textual expressions also exposed an inclination towards questioning the strict division into the real and the unreal.

Subsequent postcolonial responses gradually developed from those early attempts to describe formerly colonised worlds from indigenous perspectives, yielding insight into other realities through fictional modes and genres that ranged from realism to magical realism, science fiction, and the Gothic. Conditioned in part by postcolonial cultural heterogeneity, the wide variety of approaches to the real has ensured a continued questioning of uniform colonial images of othered worlds. As the works discussed further in the text hope to show, the extraordinary diversity of postcolonial treatments of the real

has remained unaffected by the gradual shift in postcolonial writing away from the oppositional strategy of writing back towards less antagonistic, yet equally critical, considerations of the political, economic, demographic, cultural, and other consequences of colonialism in the neocolonial world. The specific concerns of different stages in the development of postcolonial literature, of different postcolonial cultures and authors continue to find expression in both realistic and fantastic narratives. Due to a widespread scholarly interest in fantastic modes and genres, especially magical realism, and perhaps even a certain preference for them, as Sorensen's analysis of postcolonial realism suggests, they may be mistaken as default. Yet, realist postcolonial fiction demonstrates that no single narrative mode or genre should be automatically expected.

Postcolonial literature that employs the fantastic describes worlds where the dethronement of the binary real/unreal achieves subversive purposes. Postcolonial magical realism employs its distinctive duality to rewrite reality as one in which the real and the magical merge, mirroring the simultaneously fragmented and plural nature of postcolonial societies and identities. Postcolonial science fiction disrupts at one stroke the conventions of an essentially Western genre and the Western claim to scientific advances. The postcolonial Gothic uses yet another Western genre to subvert the concepts of the rational and the explicable, and recast (post)colonial oppression as Gothic entrapment. In general, the fantastic in postcolonial writing emphasises cultural peculiarity or pride in cultural origins, particularly when it relies on indigenous traditions, reflects hybrid postcolonial realities and perspectives, and responds to Empire's obsession with rationality, objectivity, and logic.

As the following discussion hopes to demonstrate despite its unavoidable limitations in scope, postcolonial fiction in all its manifestations offers novel takes on the real and the logical. To illustrate it, the discussion considers a selection of works that are taken as good examples of different postcolonial approaches to the real, understood in its specific, though not always specified, historical, political, economic, and/or cultural contexts. The list of these approaches is far from exhaustive, but a more comprehensive one, involving allegory or irony, for instance, would require a book-length study. As flawed as any selection must be, this one attempts to be inclusive in its treatments of novels, novellas, and graphic novels as fiction, as well as in its focus on both much-

debated authors, like Salman Rushdie, and those, like Shaun Tan, whose work is yet to be thoroughly examined. It also takes a broad view of postcolonial literature as one whose themes, forms, attitudes, and languages have been crucially defined by the experience of colonisation, with a special interest here in literatures written from formerly marginalised positions. The authors' cultural backgrounds—an assortment of African, Caribbean, Indian, British, Chinese, Malay, and Australian roots—is a mere coincidence as the selection is inspired by books rather than authors, whose shared ties with the "bitterly contested field" (Punter 5) of the postcolonial suffice. As a result, the scope of cultural influences is not wide enough to involve all postcolonial literatures, but they would hardly find enough space in a book, let alone an article. The selected works do reflect the heterogeneity of postcolonial cultures, albeit to a certain extent, which indicates the existence of postcolonial literatures within the generalising term postcolonial literature that has been and will be contested on account of its application to various cultural and historical contexts, geographies, and identities. Although culture is an important factor in the considerations that follow, mode or genre provides the starting point. Since the selected writers and works also belong to various stages in the development of postcolonial literature in English, their aims, strategies, and achievements sometimes significantly vary. The following selection, therefore, intends to illustrate certain tendencies within postcolonial fiction, all the while bearing in mind that it is not, nor can it be, representative of all postcolonial literature(s).

"New angles at which to enter reality"

Perhaps the most logical way to begin a discussion of postcolonial approaches to the real would be to briefly outline the realism of early postcolonial writers, a mode, genre, or "aesthetic style" that responded "to the political idea of a normative reality" (Sorensen 16). At the time when postcolonial literatures were being born, Western literatures indulged in inward-looking experimentation with form under the impression that there were no new stories to tell and that experimental forms were adequate for portraying unstable twentieth-century realities. Postcolonial literatures, on the other hand, offered a wealth of new stories, so the need for formal experimentation was less prominent and occurred spontaneously when, for instance, the novel was being reshaped by the

rhythms of indigenous oral storytelling. In this initial stage, focus was on literary excavations of precolonial histories and cultures, and native representations of colonisation and its aftermath. Those early works responded to European constructs with their own versions of the real, rarely conforming to the neat division between the material and the spiritual. Put differently, from the outset, postcolonial literature has questioned variants of European realism and what constitutes reality, so the real in fictions like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) incorporates spirits, curses, and punishments by the gods as vital elements of reality: "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them…" (Achebe 115). Characterised by such boundary crossing, Achebe's deliberately omniscient representation of the real was part of a larger project of exposing colonial narratives about Africa as "crude distortions of the African character" (Gikandi). As a consequence, the dominant view of Achebe's realism is that it counteracts colonial representations of Africa through "a systematic critique of Africanist discourse" (Gikandi).

Within that frame of interpretation, instead of the dark continent of colonial literature, Africa emerges in Achebe's work as a place of history, government, social structures, religion, and culture revived through language, customs, and stories, restoring the dignity of Igbos as individualised human beings capable of the good and the bad. In an attempt to avoid uncritical glorification and show that the past never exists in an untainted form, alongside the values of Igbo culture and peasant life, Achebe also imagines the society's weaknesses and mistakes, at times cruel patriarchal and superstitious practices, and the deepening social divisions that play into the hands of colonialism. In a fiction that characteristically links realism with the national imaginary, hypermasculine Okonkwo is the central symbol of tradition. He and the culture he epitomises are caught between tradition and modernity, the crisis of authority and the need for negotiation being tragically confirmed by Okonkwo's suicide as a result of his inability to engage in a constructive struggle with the disruption of traditional ways of life. If Okonkwo's combative traditionalism represents anticolonial resistance, the end of his life points to the need for dialogue that subsequent postcolonial literature managed to open.

According to Morrison, such realism was less inclined towards historical retrieval since “the real commitment of African writers like Achebe was not […] to the redemption of precolonial traditions, but rather to the emergence of an African modernity” (15). Achebe was able to enter “the scene of modern writing and create a space for African self-fashioning” (Gikandi) but, perhaps expectedly, his dedication to African modernity has been criticised as allegiance to the Western ideology of modernity, and so has his employment of modernist rhetoric. Achebe’s writing responds to the Eurocentrism of modernist European literature but also establishes a dialogue between realism and modernism, where “modernism’s rhetoric of failure and displacement” is used “to expose the anxieties of late empire” (Gikandi). Even though Achebe’s much-discussed work is not epitomic of all early postcolonial writing, it exemplifies a dominant trend that emerged in postcolonial literatures across the globe. In their different ways, some more realist than others, authors like R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, George Lamming, or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o claimed the authority to narrate their worlds and realities.

As an inclusive heterogeneous mode/genre/style that rendered the real from politically charged native perspectives, early postcolonial realism was already a departure from European representations. It was eventually displaced by “[f]antasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism” (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 19), but this gradual process did not suppress realism as a vehicle for portraying (post)colonial realities. Postcolonial realism continues to scrutinise and formally reflect the power relations, political and economic inequalities, and ignored experiences of the globalised neocolonial world. Contemporary novelists employ realism to examine colonial legacies in urban settings of the Western world (Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth,* 2000), widen the geography to include formerly colonised spaces (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah,* 2013), or consider postcolonial issues from a long historical perspective (Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts,* 1997). Such realism ventures well beyond classical realism and early postcolonial realism, and in its selection of details proves that “realism is a mere convention rather than a close apprehension of the real” (Cobley 106). Particularly when characterised by fractured forms that reflect historical discontinuity, displacement of individuals and communities, and ruptures in one’s identity, postcolonial realism refrains from a desire “to depict social realities in detail and

with great fidelity" (Cobley 109). Instead, it alternates between fragments focused on specific experiences and gaps, which imbues the real with a sense of ambivalence.

Ambivalence is arguably one of the most significant qualities of the real in Caryl Phillips's fiction, and is a defining trait of novels like *A Distant Shore* (2004) and *Crossing the River* (1993). If *Things Fall Apart* is a national allegory, *A Distant Shore* can be read as a state-of-the-nation novel that exposes fissured national identity and the hidden realities of a divided nation. To extend the old argument that the idea of the nation is summoned in times of war, it is summoned in times of any crisis which threatens or disrupts it. In Phillips's novel, threat assumes the shape of an illegal migrant whose presence in England disturbs the comforting but illusory national homogeneity, pointing to faults that result from the nation's reluctance to accept its own cultural, racial, and ethnic heterogeneity. Layered ambivalence in Phillips's representation of contemporary British reality concerns "ambivalence towards […] Britain, […] the place to which the migrant belongs as an outsider" (Clingman 47), the host country's ambivalence towards the migrant/outsider, and ambivalence ensuing from the migrant's effort to remember details of his supposed crime while suppressing the memory of his tragic past in a war-torn African country. Ambivalence is also a feature of form in the novel, so the pervasive sense of duality and fracture translates into a double or fractured narrative of Gabriel/Solomon, the said migrant, and his neighbour Dorothy.

That contemporary postcolonial realism may move away from the nation towards transnationalism is confirmed by novels like Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) and Phillips's *Crossing the River*, which present the real from a wider cultural, spatial and/or temporal perspective. Structurally dispersed to better convey discontinuity, *Crossing the River* compassionately recasts the history of slavery as interconnected stories of individual suffering across time and space, contradicting a certain tendency that Sorensen finds in postcolonial interpretations of realism. In his view, "postcolonial readings of distinctly anti-realist texts tend to magnify the polyphonic aspects, whereas readings of literary realism often reduce the latter to simple, thematic representations of national homogenization" (44). Phillips's formally and thematically complex polyphonic representation of transnational realities lost in the gaps between official history and unofficial memory imagines the real in the voids of history, and undermines realism's

predominantly single/omniscient perspective. With its openness and ambivalence, the novel challenges yet another misassumption, one that sees realist novels as closed, exemplifying at the same time the political implications of postcolonial realism. Loaded with political significance, Phillips's realism casts a certain shadow on Sorensen's claim that realism is a style that "*precedes* the reality of the nation-state, one that gradually disappears the moment the latter comes fully into being" (156). Even if realism appears to have fallen out of favour (Walder 126), it remains, especially in its ruptured varieties, a powerful means of representing disjointedness at the heart of contemporary realities.

To call into question the colonial monopolisation of the real and its totalising misconstructions, postcolonial literature has used its own variants of literary realism as a strategy of resistance to the conservative realism of colonial texts, which was itself a mode of fantasy that relied entirely on its authors' interpretations of the world. The above examples are far from a comprehensive list of "[t]he kinds, variations, and degrees of realism emerging within postcolonial contexts" (Sorensen 136) but may serve to illustrate that realism has never been a unified phenomenon in postcolonial fiction and has always been marked by a political agenda. In some instances, the political agenda inspired a preference for realist portrayal at the expense of alternative modes of representation, which is why J. M. Coetzee's allegorical novels were criticised for their apparent lack of engagement with South Africa. However, it would be reductive to think that there is only one correct way to represent the real, and the realist approach to racial oppression and responsibility that was expected of white writing in South Africa in the political climate of atonement does not reflect a worldwide postcolonial trend. Realist representations do not cancel the validity of anti-realist takes on the real, and switching from realism to allegory and back, Coetzee's oeuvre demonstrates that it is possible to problematise the history and reality of South Africa both directly and indirectly while exploring themes like violence, trauma, oppression, domination, or authority that transcend any given context. Despite the occasional need for realism and an extraordinary number of writers who use it, "literary realism constitutes an interesting *blind spot* within postcolonial studies" (Sorensen 5) and is still insufficiently researched as outdated, atavistic, or anachronistic. Non-realist and anti-realist approaches, on the other hand, have attracted more scholarly attention on the grounds of their supposedly

wider and more radical palette of strategies to render and question the real. Revealing that all representation is just that, a representation of the real, the fantastic modes and genres have played a pivotal role in resistance and cultural self-representation. In further analysis, I will focus on some of the most common counterweights of realism to determine how they off-centre the real, and to understand the reasons behind scholarly favouritism of non-realist and anti-realist discourses.

The indisputable academic preference for modes and genres antithetical to realism can at least in part be attributed to the effectiveness of their representations of the (post)colonial real, for which they are sometimes mistakenly understood as more adequate and more typically postcolonial than realism. They have indeed proved invaluable in articulating political radicalism and communicating the multiplicity and partiality of postcolonial cultures and identities, while responding to the Western notions of the rational, the logical, and the realist(ic). Among them, magical realism stands out as by far the most extensively researched mode, genre, and discourse, as Stephen Slemon defines it, whose essential hybridity mirrors the now thoroughly exhausted concept of postcolonial hybridity. Contrary to Amaryll Chanady's distinction between magical realism and fantastic literature, I see it as a blend of realist and fantastic codes which questions discourses reliant on seemingly unassailable truths. This enables it to achieve multiple purposes: to transcend the binary logic of the rational/irrational or the real/fantastic; to enact the duality, plurality, hybridity, and fragmentation of postcolonial cultures, nations, and identities; to assert the existence of multiple realities and their interpretations; and to depict political, economic, and cultural disorder in postcolonial nations. "As a postcolonial response to colonialism's often brutal enforcing of a selectively conceived modernity" (Warnes 12), driven by the desire to rewrite the processes and outcomes of writing history and reality, magical realism is frequently combined with the equally split or double discourse of historiographic metafiction. With or without historiographic metafiction, magical realism gestures towards classical realism in that it sometimes imagines the troubling process of building/narrating postcolonial nations, perhaps most famously in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), but unlike the more hopeful realism, magical realism narrates the nation as a political failure. Again like realism, it also reaches beyond narratives of the nation to address

transnational or international concerns, as in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), a novel of and about our thoroughly globalised world.

Its perplexing terminology, signification, definition, and categorisation aside, magical realism has been variously interpreted as a hybrid and liminal, culturally specific or international phenomenon with extraordinary subversive potential rooted in a play with "assumptions about the nature of what is real and what is not" (Warnes 2). In its in-betweenness, restoration of indigenous cultures, cultural cross-pollination, non-linear spatiotemporality, unstable boundaries, and ex-centric origins, magical realism is particularly appealing to postcolonial literature's strategies of subversion. It favours neither magic nor realism but offers a split and hybrid system of representation that reflects our flawed perception. In its most recent incarnations, it is a mode/genre whose magic "rearranges our sensory capacities opening thresholds to othered presences and forms of knowing that braid reality into dynamic entanglements" (Perez and Chevalier 19). Its incredible capacity for transformation—think only of the variety of cultures, types, purposes, and features at play—precludes a unified definition. The phenomenon is simply too heterogeneous to fit any neatly defined category, so the following example offers a mere glimpse into the contemporary variants of magical realism outside the magical realist mainstream.

In his study of postcolonial realism, Sorensen claims that in the narrativisation of civil war in Nigeria it is realist Nigerian fiction that "becomes a way of addressing not simply injustice and cruelty carried out by either party, but also a larger perspective that transcends partisan views and recalls affective sentiments of fellow-feeling, of collective suffering" (108). Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007) shows that a blend of naturalism and fantasy can be equally effective in this respect, without specifying the exact war since Abani's "primary purpose is not to document or historicize the necropolitical conditions of a particular deathworld" (Durrant 187). Because of its lyrical but graphic representation of the horrors of post-independence conflicts, the novella lends itself easily to trauma studies, but to interpret it solely as "a straightforward representation of a necropolitical world risks succumbing to nihilism" (Durrant 180). The narrator has lost hope but his narrative has not: love and beauty survive in all the madness, and the narrator is finally reunited with the ancestral spirit world. Like all the other works

mentioned here, *Song for Night* “resist[s] textbook postcolonial approaches” (Tunca) in its exploration of trauma and moral relativism in times of war. As I hope to demonstrate, it also escapes generic pigeonholing since the narrative straddles magical realism and (animist) realism.

It is narrated by the imagined voice of the literally muted My Luck, a child soldier who finds himself in “a strange place to be at fifteen, bereft of hope and very nearly of […] humanity” (Abani 19). His post-explosion quest for his lost platoon turns out to be a journey of self-realisation and into afterlife. What at first strikes the reader as a series of unusual occurrences—his unit is nowhere to be found, the river is flanking him, his cigarette pack never runs out, his memories are all jumbled, he keeps shuddering and is haunted by insatiable hunger and thirst, temporal progression seems off, and people seem to be mistaking him for a spirit—become hints about the real nature of My Luck’s journey. Caught in the liminal state before his soul has crossed into the other world, he tells a story that is caught between magic and reality. The real in the novella is equally marked by details of war atrocities—murder, rape, cannibalism – and references to ghosts, spirits, and superstitions. Beckoning towards the material reality, the narrator informs us that “after three years of civil war nothing is strange anymore” and “everything is possible” (Abani 31, 109), so his story blends magic and realism to represent a world of blurred boundaries—life/death, right/wrong, friend/enemy, human/spirit—and explore unspeakable trauma. The novella’s blurred boundaries facilitate Abani’s narrativisation of a child-soldier’s experience as morally dubious since the work “refuses the sentimental portrayal of the child-soldier as innocent victim” (Durrant 194), takes a “step back from mimetic realism”, and “acts as a safeguard against any ‘unchecked identification’” (Tunca). The chosen mode also allows Abani to present “two levels of reality: one is an ‘objective’, outside realm in which the mute hero and his friends cannot communicate verbally; the other is an inner, imaginary sphere in which My Luck tells his story and can hear his friends’ thoughts and feelings” (Tunca). Because they are conditioned by language, the realms evoke the linguistic struggle that took place across postcolonial contexts as a struggle between different systems or codes of expression, representation, and interpretation.

Different systems of interpreting the real coexist in the novella, so the variously defined real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, traditional and modern combine to create a hybrid reality whose opposing codes function in such a way that "[o]n the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality" (Warnes 3). My Luck confirms that when he asserts the reality of the spirit world—"the apparitions I have seen are real" (Abani 109)—in a story which constantly "draws attention to its own fictional quality" (Tunca). The result is similar to the effect silence has on My Luck: such a narrative "opens up your view of the world" (Abani 21). The essential ambiguity of magical realism in the novella achieves another goal as it compensates for the failure of conventional means of expression to convey trauma, and potentially distances the reader from it. In Sam Durrant's view, however, the novella's main concern lies beyond relating traumatic experiences for he believes Abani's effort is connected to animism: *Song for Night* centres around one's identification with the world rather than one's representation of it. In that sense, the novella is perhaps closer to animist realism since "the mimesis at work in *Song for Night* has as its fundamental goal its narrator's reabsorption into the (spirit-)world" (Durrant 188).

Whether we read it as magical or animist realism, *Song for Night* exhibits contemporary transnational and cosmopolitan sentiments by pointing out the significance of the local in the global and plunging into cultural mongrelisation. Instead of fencing itself within a single culture, the novella narrates a world where old African legends coexist with American popular culture. A hint at the novella's mongrelised nature is provided even before the story begins: the epigraphs taken from Molière and Castaneda manifest that, compared with Achebe's nativist work that describes a particular moment in Igbo history, Abani's novella is transcultural as well as African. If we agree with Durrant's view that "the peculiar, residual 'autonomy' of African literature does not consist in the recovery of a lost cultural tradition, as critics once claimed of novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, but rather in the invention of tradition" (182), then magical, or animist, realism helps *Song for Night* do precisely that. Since it draws on cross-cultural sources, it also avoids one of the pitfalls of magical realism, a possible resurrection of stereotypes about irrationality and re-exoticisation of cultures outside Europe. Dismissing the argument that magical realism has become "a cliché, a titillating

narrative trick", *Song for Night* nurtures "counter-forces and counter-realities" and therefore "guarantees that something else exists whose decolonial energies cannot be fully tamed" (Perez and Chevalier 6, 3).

Another genre that draws strength from what cannot be tamed, and to that end sometimes joins forces with historiographic metafiction, is the postcolonial Gothic. Although they may at first seems like worlds apart, postcolonial literature and the Gothic evince "a shared interest in challenging post-enlightenment notions of rationality" (Smith and Hughes 1), exploring different forms of otherness, and broadening the outlook on the real. Before they received serious readerly and scholarly attention, postcolonial literature and the Gothic were outside the mainstream, occupying themselves with what mainstream literature deemed neither interesting nor significant. Their origins on the periphery were a starting point for their collaboration. When they intersect, the Gothic becomes a space for literary examinations of the darker and more dangerous aspects of postcolonial realities, while the postcolonial endows the subversive energies of the Gothic with political purpose and anchorage in the material reality. A good illustration of that is when the postcolonial Gothic looks into the postcolonial nation as "the collective fantasy of a stifled people" (Rushdie, *Shame* 263). The transgressive potential of the Gothic is then mobilised to analyse post-independence isolation, corruption, oppression, and disappointment.

Set "at a slight angle to reality" (Rushdie, *Shame* 29), Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1995) relies on a number of Gothic conventions to thematise political and gender oppression, violence, and monstrosity in the context of a repressive Peccavistani regime that corrodes itself from the inside. The imaginary country, like the character who symbolises it, represents "the wrong miracle" and belongs in a world where democracy has "never been more than a bird of passage" (Rushdie, *Shame* 89, 204). Its claustrophobic, labyrinthine spaces where characters, especially female, are imprisoned and isolated, represent geographically dislocated Gothic sites of violence and haunting that seem to exist outside time. Spaces like the Nishapur house or the Mohenjo estate thus place "emphasis on enclosure, entrapment and alienation" (Teverson 137), serving the novel's critique of the corrupt, tyrannical regime of fictionalised Pakistan and its oppressive moral code. Suspending the novel between reality and fantasy, Rushdie

speaks out about political and moral oppression, and truth confined: "there are things that cannot be permitted to be true" (Rushdie, *Shame* 82).

With its amalgam of the real and fantastic, and beginning in a "reclusive mansion … neither material nor spiritual" (Rushdie, *Shame* 30), *Shame* couples magical realist and Gothic revelry in duality to problematise the dichotomies civilisation/barbarism, honour/shame, innocence/monstrosity, and man/woman. By reversing the stereotypical characters of the vulnerable Gothic heroine and her commonly male saviour, *Shame* probes the unresolved issue of male threat and female victimisation in the real world. Modelling his intellectually challenged, and therefore innocent and more vulnerable, heroine Sufiya in unexpected ways on real-world victims and fictional characters from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), "Beauty and the Beast" (1740), and *Jane Eyre* (1847), Rushdie turns her into a monstrous avenger of social evils who disrupts the image of female submissiveness and passivity, and exposes the unpalatable truth that there *is* "a place for monsters in civilized society" (Rushdie, *Shame* 199). The novel employs yet another Gothic trope, Frankensteinian, to shape Sufyia as a socially created monster with opposing features and a product of the political pathology of post-independence conflicts. By setting against male shamelessness and corruption rebels against female victimisation among whom Sufiya embodies collective shame, the novel traces the connections between colonialism, politics, gender, and sexuality in a mish-mash of naturalism and fantasy because "[r]ealism can break a writer's heart" (Rushdie, *Shame* 70).

In his rendering of postcolonial imaginings, Punter defines the literary as inevitably retreating from the real, as

> that which resists pinning down […] that which will always […] produce "other," "unauthorised" meanings; as that which conjures phantoms, which banishes phantoms […] as a phenomenon of lies and truth, of narratives that wind and twist and go nowhere, of history and trauma endlessly and impossibly rewriting each other […] as the distorted mirroring, the per-version, of the worlds in which it functions (5-6).

Nowhere is this more obvious perhaps than in the postcolonial Gothic. Driven by the conjured twinned ghosts of history and trauma, Rushdie's meandering Gothic narrative per-verts the real, entangling truth and lies beyond recognition. Like magical realism, the Gothic in postcolonial fiction narrates other, unauthorised realities, rewriting history to

reveal trauma, trauma that is caused in *Shame* by a politically corrupt patriarchal regime. Rushdie's per-version of history and reality that exposes political and moral corruption realises the subversive potential of the Gothic most persuasively in its exploration of "the relations between monstrosity and power" (Punter 110). The novel's unlikely monstrous Other is the repository of her people's shame, which empowers her by fuelling her rebellion against the political status quo and its patriarchal oppression, at the same time disempowering the system's figures of authority. The monster here is then "the ultimate metaphor for political and social contamination: in her body emerge all the crimes and violences of her society" (Punter 112) that will bring about its downfall. "At a slight angle to reality", Rushdie's unauthorised narrative thus employs Gothic conventions to thematise the very real social, political, economic, and moral turmoil in post-independence societies.

Postcolonial retreats from realism and excursions into fantasy and speculation have also given some prominence to science fiction, which provides postcolonial fiction with another territory in which to examine the uneasy issues of the real. As Raja and Nandi point out,

> [t]he connection between science fiction and postcolonial studies is almost natural: both these fields are deeply concerned with questions of temporality, space, and existence. Central […] to both […] are the questions of the 'other'—human, machine, cyborg—and the nature of multiple narratives of history and utopias and dystopias of the future (9).

At its beginnings, when Mary Shelley's 1818 proto-science fiction *Frankenstein* was published, science fiction was entangled with the history of industrialisation, capitalism, colonialism, and scientific advances, so well before science fiction's definition as a genre in the 1920s, its precursors were inspired by imperial expansion into unknown territories and contact with alien cultures. It is all too easy to draw parallels between invading extraterrestrials and colonisers, or aliens and racial or ethnic Others, but science fiction cannot be reduced to any number of conventions nor can the alien and the unexplored strange land be reduced to a single signification, as Rieder's and Langer's detailed analyses reveal. Despite the genre's fluid nature, the link with colonialism is clear in the concerns that "range from triumphal fantasies of appropriating land, power, sex, and treasure in tales of exploration and adventure, to nightmarish reversals of the positions

of colonizer and colonized in tales of invasion and apocalypse" (Rieder 21). So is its connection with postcolonialism's project of destabilizing binaries, exposing inequalities, and subverting colonial tropes. Postcolonial science fiction sometimes goes a step further to envision future potentialities that are not necessarily "bounded and inflected by history" (Langer 80) but open up to the possibility of tolerant creaturely coexistence in a utopian cosmopolitan world.

That possibility is the centrepiece of Shaun Tan's wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* (2007). Although it may seem unusual to shift attention from the more conventional fictions to one that belongs to a long cross-cultural history of graphic narratives, it is chosen here on thematic grounds and "the assumption that the formal, the aesthetic and the political are never separable categories" (Knowles *et al*. 380). Furthermore, as studies by Daniel Stein, Jan-noel Thon, Simon Grennan, Andrés Romero-Jódar, Michael A. Chaney, and Robert Petersen all show, graphic novels are treated as novels and fictions in scholarly analyses. *The Arrival*, a work that has already been read as a postcolonial science fiction novel in the special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* dedicated to graphic novels, examines what Langer identifies as some of the key themes of postcolonial science fiction: otherness, diaspora, and movement (4). To paint a nuanced picture of the migratory experience, Tan develops a narrative on migration and belonging, otherness and strangeness, interspecies communication, and technological innovation that operates purely on the visual level, highlighting the inadequacy of verbal expression to convey dislocation and possible trauma. Fantastic and naturalistic details of atrocities suffered at home—oppression, colonisation, war, and poverty—establish a dialogue with dreamlike images of life in The New Country. On the way there, isolation and loneliness are visually communicated in chapter two when the panels focus on the migrant behind the ship's porthole and then gradually zoom out to show more and more portholes presumably hiding other migrants, but the page also inevitably imparts a sense of togetherness. Together they experience the strangeness of the new place as "an alternative universe" (Earle 390) where they are first confronted with unusual birds and statues. They all face difficulties in finding accommodation, learning a new language, and understanding habits and customs as cultural aliens. "What the alien signifies […] varies greatly" (Langer 3) in both postcolonial and science

fiction, so Tan's migrant becomes an observer of otherness and strangeness, not merely their epitome. Difference and otherness are rendered interesting rather than problematic (Earle 396), and the strange new appliances, houses, creatures, food, and weather are all designed to reflect the strangeness, novelty, and unhomeliness that arouse the migrant's curiosity. Tan plays with what Langer calls science fiction's corporeal conceptualisation of otherness (82) and fuses the strange with the familiar, so the unusual creatures resemble animals of the real world and the strangely familiar household appliances operate differently from those at home. As the migrant is daily forced to deal with strangeness and otherness, that of the new world and his own, the journey additionally enables a "critical perspective on one's home culture" (Rieder 2), its reassessment from a distance, beckoning towards a cosmopolitan future of truly tolerant postnational coexistence. To that end, The New Country's welcoming quality is suggested upon arrival by the statues of two human figures shaking hands, but the true nature of its cosmopolitanism is revealed only by the fact that the figures are holding animal companions.

The "posthuman quality" (Banerjee 403) of Tan's approach to the real lies in his portrayal of a world populated with humans, strange yet familiar creatures, and unusual technology. The images' sepia tones afford a long historical perspective, so the impression is that the story is at the same time age-old, posthuman, and timeless. Its posthuman aspect lies in its representation of "an egalitarianism of species" (Banerjee 400). Interspecies communication and warm, helpful creaturely coexistence evoke the belief that "hope lies in our forgotten connection to (other) animals" (Durrant 179). In his analysis of Abani's *Song for Night*, Durrant makes a claim that may equally apply to *The Arrival*: "human alienation tips over into forms of trans-species relationality, into an awareness of our common creatureliness" (186).

What remains to be seen is if this is a utopian representation of reality. Admittedly, Tan's compassionate vision ignores the fact that cosmopolitanism and postnationalism may not always be "in the best interest of those on the periphery of the global division of labor" (Raja and Nandi 9). As if to confirm that, The New Country's resemblance to Ellis Island is not only a reminder of the history of migration to America as a site of cultural encounters but a confirmation that "globalization, instead of creating a two-way

hybridization process, also tends to restructure the global cultures mostly in the image of a Western and North-Atlantic norm" (Raja and Nandi 8). This potentially re-establishes the West as the horizon of civilisation where those who flee the less civilised corners of the world congregate. The redeeming quality of Tan's vision of The New Country is that it is not so much a technologically advanced world but one which comes close to the horizon of civilisation as a harmonious coexistence of cultures and species "with incommensurable difference" (Banerjee 402). The belief in progress that characterises science fiction here finds expression in a progress of humaneness and tolerance.

The postcolonial real and the contentious issue of representation

As Sorensen reminds us in his insightful, albeit theoretically overburdened and at times overgeneralising study, the question of representation has always been crucial to postcolonial studies. It has been posited as a problem since the field's conception, which has resulted in a pervasive struggle against representation (12-13). How we represent the real, in all its diversity, using what means and from what perspectives, continues to spark off debates while postcolonial treatments of the real, formally and generically experimental or not, continue to vary. In its search for the best way to approach the real, postcolonial studies has favoured the view that "a radical postcolonial text had to be A) cosmopolitan, or at least explicitly antinationalist, and B) modernist/postmodernist, or at least anti-realist" (Sorensen 37), dismissing on at least one ground a very large and diverse body of realist postcolonial fiction. Yet, recent critical studies by Sorensen, Robinette, and others point to an awakening interest in, and a critical reappraisal of, the politically charged tradition of postcolonial realism. Despite postcolonial studies' dismissal of literary realism as anachronistic and wedded to nationalist ideologies, postcolonial literature continues to use both realist and anti-realist modes and genres, all of them effective in their peculiar ways in the representation of the real. Postcolonial studies' reluctance to engage with literary realism may also be attributed to the common perception that "magical realism and other forms of antirealism" are "more representative of postcolonialism" (Sorensen 5). Their hybrid and fragmented nature reflects the postcolonial condition and provides fertile ground for radically subversive

critique of totalising discourses, but to claim that they are more rather than differently representative of postcolonialism is largely unfounded.

The idea behind this discussion was to examine different postcolonial approaches to the real and demonstrate their continued relevance. In the early stages of postcolonial fiction, realism helped revive buried traditions and, unlike European realisms, presupposed the existence of magic and spirit worlds. Achebe's masterful interweaving of Igbo storytelling traditions into the novel's narrative, his introduction of Igbo words and sayings in an English text whose sentences settle into the rhythm of Igbo, and his depiction of a precolonial society in Africa in all its richness and vulnerability, all use realism to contest the colonial notion of Africa as the Dark Continent. In its contemporary varieties, realism may assume a more traditional form (Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* (2017)) or a scattered one (Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997)) to depict the peculiarly postcolonial aspects of disjointedness and discontinuity. Phillips's double-voiced *A Distant Shore* formally reflects the geographical, cultural, and emotional discontinuity of migration, the mental and emotional disjointedness caused by the joint forces of gender oppression and ageism, as well as the disjuncture at the heart of the contemporary British identity. As it is placed between memory and factuality, between official and unofficial accounts, such realism is very far from a straightforward representation of reality and is characterised by a degree of ambivalence that brings it close to non-realist or anti-realist representations. Among these, magical realism still takes precedence as a "global genre" that now ventures "beyond the concrete architecture of postcolonial" in the technologically advanced globalised world of more frequent cultural encounters since "contemporary magical realism engages […] the density of experience where even the most quotidian boundaries of the self are crossed by strange and dynamic encounters" (Perez and Chevalier 2). Often mistakenly seen as the exclusive property of certain cultures, magical realism wishes "to expand existing categories of the real" or indeed "rupture them altogether", which equally applies to all postcolonial approaches to the real that emerge as "a response to the 'othering' that accompanies Western colonialism" (Warnes 151-2). Abani's *Song for Night* illustrates that it is impossible to provide an all-encompassing definition of magical realism, just as it is to confine it to any single cultural context. In its culturally hybrid amalgamation of the spirit world and the

real world, the novella can be read as representative of both magical and animist realism whose cross-cultural references suggest that magical realism exists in a variety of contexts where it serves different subversive purposes. Subversion also characterises the postcolonial Gothic and science fiction, where the real is approached "at a slight angle" that per-verts the world of fact to expose hidden layers of reality. With its peculiar rendering of Gothic conventions, such as labyrinthine mansions, monsters, entrapment, violence, and death, Rushdie's claustrophobic *Shame* protests against post-independence corruption, and oppression, while Tan's dreamlike visual narrative joins the old and the new, the real and the fantastic, to share the painful nuances of underprivileged migratory experiences that are left out of dominant narratives. As all the genres and modes analysed here confirm, postcolonial approaches to the real are driven by the need for self-representation and subversion of dominant narratives, but more importantly, postcolonial realism, magical realism, the Gothic, and science fiction account for the historical trauma of colonialism and offer important insights into "what it means to be human" (Smith and Hughes 2).

Of all the fictions discussed in this article, Tan's posthuman, postnational, and cosmopolitan novel most persuasively argues for representations of the real that reach beyond the verbal to benefit from the immediacy of the visual, and beyond the human to involve all life forms. Whether they thematise colonisation, migration, war, post-independence corruption and oppression, or the necessity of interspecies communication, postcolonial approaches to the real are generally inclusive in appreciating the connections with the magical, the irrational, the spiritual, and the creaturely. They do not follow the "either/or" logic but instead assume a more fluid one that off-centres any monolithic representation of the real. Achebe's realism asserts the humanity and traditions of Igbo Africans, and their connection with the spirit world. Phillips's more ambivalent and fragmented approach formally reflects historical discontinuity in the contexts of past and present persecutions and migrations. Abani's magical or animist realism allows graphic details of a brutal civil war to play in counterpoint with My Luck's reconnection with his ancestors. Rushdie's generically unwieldy novel that combines the Gothic, magical realism, tragedy, political satire, and dystopia, playfully critiques political corruption, gender oppression, and misconceptions

about civilisation and barbarism. Finally, Tan's graphic novel offers a purely visual take on the real to redefine science fiction's "confrontations with enigmatic others" (Rieder 61), examine the universal features of migration, and present diaspora "not [as] transplantation but negotiation" (Langer 80). Each one of these heterogeneous approaches to the real addresses postcolonial issues in the context of larger-scale dialogues, redefining "mimesis as a dynamic, transformatory engagement with the world, rather than a static attempt to capture the world" (Durrant 182), and showing that "[c]ulture, nature, family, belief, work, play language […] are flexible realities" (Earle 388).

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