

## **Magical Realism: A Narrative of Celebration or Disillusionment? South African Literature in the Transition Period**

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the emergence of magical realism as a narrative form embraced by a number of South African writers in the transition period and increasingly attuned to South African writing sensibility during this time. I argue that South African magical realism goes beyond the joining of realist and postmodern narrative strands by reconciling realism's faithfulness to the socio-political context and postmodernism's devotion to formal experimentation, syncretism, and meta-fiction. Magical realism simultaneously relies heavily on African oral traditions, and in doing so, it not only constitutes a point of confluence for black and white writing of the apartheid era, but it also epitomises the reconciliation of Eurocentric Western rationalism and African tradition. While discussing magic realism in relation to the post-apartheid novels of André Brink and Zakes Mda, this article points towards the possible origins of the proliferation of South African texts embracing this narrative mode in the period directly following the demise of apartheid, as well as the possible reasons behind the gradual abandonment of magical realist narrative strategy in post-millennial South African fiction. Thus, South African magical realist texts will be positioned at the intersection between literature of celebration and literature of disillusionment, emerging out of the short-lived coexistence of the two literary trends in South African literary history.

**Keywords:** André Brink, dystopia, literature of disillusionment, literature of celebration, magical realism, Zakes Mda, South African history, South African literature, transitional period

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The need to revisit history has accompanied and characterised the literature of most of the great thresholds of change, . . . those periods in which mankind starts dreaming in a different key.

(André Brink, *Reinventing a Continent* 230)

A marked preoccupation with history and an urge to re-visit and critically re-examine the past has been at the heart of a large body of post-colonial texts. Similarly, the need to re-negotiate historical accounts became a pressing concern of South African literature in the wake of the demise of apartheid, most notably in the period of political transition from the apartheid system to democratic rule, roughly covering the entire decade of the 1990s. In a society where identities were long allocated and imposed from above, where memories from the margins were systematically suppressed in the pre-colonial, colonial, as well as apartheid era, the urge to revisit the past and reassess its implications for contemporaneity proved indispensable for the processes of reconciliation and identity reconstruction instigated by the decline of apartheid.

Nevertheless, South African writers at large have never undertaken the task of critically interrogating history uniformly. When pondering the developments in South African writing prior to the demise of apartheid, Jabulani Mkhize juxtaposes “white writing” and “black writing” as two dominant trends in South African literature of the period (173). This division, though pointing towards certain marked preferences of ethnic groups, does not necessarily have to be carried out along racial lines. Thus, by “white writing” Mkhize refers to the expressed tendency to deploy modern or postmodern modes of historical narration, while “black writing” refers to the embracing of neo-realist strategies of representing the past. Expressing, in Hayden White’s words, the pronounced “impulse to moralize reality” (*The Content of the Form* 14), social realism seems to be better-suited for the purposes of the anti-apartheid struggle’s didacticism. Mkhize adopts Astradur Eysteinnsson’s premise that realism tends “to minimize the relative boundaries between literature and ‘ordinary’ social discourse” in suggesting that this minimisation strengthened realism’s status in the apartheid era as a mode of writing

most suitable to ensure the widespread ideological assent of the South African black masses (*The Concept of Modernism* 195). Bearing in mind Mothobi Mutloatse's cautionary remark that "no black writer can afford the luxury of isolation from his immediate audience" (1), one begins to perceive the tendency to avoid experimentalism on the black authors' part as a pragmatic choice or a matter of a principled abjuration of narrative forms that would elude the crude reality of social and economic inequities under apartheid and thus risk alienating the writer from society.

Indeed, in the instrumentalising context of the anti-apartheid struggle, questions of political engagement, social responsibility, and accountability came to the fore and culture was promoted primarily as "a weapon of struggle" (Sachs 187). Black writing under such circumstances became primarily a manifestation of one's ideological affiliations and thus a profoundly political act. The agenda of protest writing required explicit and straightforward engagement with the contemporary milieu. In this context, highly elusive postmodern narratives of white writers such as J.M. Coetzee were denounced, the rejection being founded on their assumed apoliticism and the general postmodern tendency to mystify information and obscure reality. Neo-realist strategies of representing contemporaneity were offered as an ethical alternative. In light of the common disregard for the postmodern complexities of content, even white writers such as Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer expressed their understanding of the marked scepticism towards non-realist narrative strategies. Before opting to discard realism in his own novelistic career, Coetzee famously enquired, "What value does the experimental line hold for Africa? . . . Does not the experimental line assume and perpetuate a rift between the writer and society which is a fact of life in the West but need not become a fact of life in Africa?" ("Alex La Guma" 6). When discussing the demands that were made of black writers under apartheid, Gordimer, on the other hand, explains that they reached a point when they had no choice but to "discard the lantern of artistic truth that reveals human worth through human ambiguity, and to see by the flames of burning vehicles only the strong, thick lines that draw heroes" (293). Therefore, for Gordimer, the essential role of any writer, black or white,

in the apartheid-era South Africa is to “describe a situation so truthfully . . . that the reader can no longer evade it” (299).

Yet this subjection of aesthetic choices to political imperatives was not endorsed without reservations, and it soon elicited severe criticism from a number of South African intellectuals, including its initial supporters. In his 1987 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, Coetzee explicitly bemoaned the degrading properties of what Gordimer termed the period’s expressed “conformity to an orthodoxy of opposition” (106): “South African literature is a literature in bondage. . . . In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 99). Among the first black writers to object to realist tradition was Lewis Nkosi, who, in as early as 1965, lamented that black writing of the period remained closer to journalism than creative writing. In his view, protest literature is mere “journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature” (*Home and Exile* 126). Interestingly, Nkosi sees the pronounced disregard for experimentalism as a result of the deprivation and isolation of the black writer rather than as a matter of ethical choice. In his path-breaking address to the African National Congress members, “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom,” Albie Sachs goes a step further by arguing for the ban of “culture [as] a weapon of struggle” for a period of five years in order to counteract what he called “a shallow and forced relationship between the two” (187). Njabulo Ndebele suggests a paradigm shift, lamenting “the exhaustion of the content by the form” (41) characterising all politically engaged writing, which he calls disdainfully “the literature of the spectacle” (44). In Ndebele’s view, the entire ethos of committed literature “permits neither inner dialogue with the self, nor a social public dialogue. It breeds insensitivity, insincerity and delusion” (50). In order to overcome what Nkosi termed the “crisis of representation” (“Resistance and the Crisis of Representation”) and liberate black literature of the period from bondage, Ndebele advocates for “the rediscovery of the ordinary,” by which he means a shift away from the grand concerns of the protest literature—the spectacular struggle of the oppressed—to the harsh realities of the struggle on a more personal level, to the affirmation of the black

people's everyday fight for survival, their meaningful spiritual and intellectual life. Only such a portrayal of black communities, attainable by means of "the sobering power of contemplation, of close analysis, and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness, and limitations" (50) would enable, Ndebele claims, the recovery of a common African spirit. Thus, what he argues for is a new mode of fiction that would come closer to the orality of black communities, echoing the storytelling traditions of rural life. Manifestly, "the rediscovery of the ordinary" would bring about a shift in emphasis in South African fiction from the public sphere to the private realm, to self-reflexivity and auto-critique.<sup>1</sup> Such a self-questioning turn inwards would naturally promote an emphasis on categories of experience that were neglected by the literature of the spectacle and in doing so would require a degree of formal experimentation in search for a narrative mode suited to its newly formulated agenda.

The debate about the suitability of realist or postmodernist narrative strategies might have continued to the present day had it not been for the emergence of magical realism as a narrative form that a number of South African writers embraced in the time of transition and that became increasingly attuned to South African writing sensibilities of the period. In his insightful analysis of magical realism in Zakes Mda's fiction, Christopher Warnes points to the fact that "the ordinary" as espoused by Ndebele actually "includes the surrealists' experiments in minute examination which revealed the extraordinary textures of ordinary objects" ("Chronicles of Belief and Unbelief" 76). Bearing in mind that Ndebele's project also promotes liberating African experience from the challenges laid out by the appalling effects of urbanisation under apartheid, Warnes concludes that the narrative strategy of magical realism might prove particularly well-fitted to Ndebele's agenda ("Chronicles" 76). Uniting both contentious narrative strands—realism's faithfulness to the socio-political context and postmodernism's devotion to formal experimentation, syncretism, and meta-fiction—magical realism relies heavily on African oral traditions, and in doing so, it not only constitutes a point of confluence for black and white writing as distinguished by Mkhize, but it also epitomises the reconciliation of Eurocentric Western rationalism and African tradition.

In her analysis of the genre of magical realism in African literature, Brenda Cooper concludes that “magical realism arises out of particular societies—postcolonial, unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and the magical views of the world co-exist” (216). She sees this mode of writing as “thriving on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity. Such zones occur where burgeoning capitalist development mingles with older pre-capitalist modes in postcolonial societies” (215). Bearing in mind that socio-economic conditions are unlikely to provide an incentive powerful enough to single-handedly prompt a revolution in aesthetics, this essay will attempt to prove that the transitional, liminal nature of magical realism stems from the co-existence of a wider scope of contradictory ontologies. Given the narrative mode’s propensity to admit a plurality of worlds and thus assuming its particular suitability for the task of bridging divides, I will demonstrate that magical realism’s reconciliatory aptitude does not remain confined to the polarised realm of modes of writing or ethnic-derived belief-systems, neither does it restrain itself to its capability to conciliate pre- and post-industrial lifestyles.

This article’s premise is that magical realism proves specifically well-attuned to thematise the collision of any incompatible categories, be it the rational and the magical, the core and the periphery, the pre- and the post-capitalist, fact and fiction, as well as the past and the present. In this respect, this narrative strategy proves exceptionally well-suited for the task confronted by post-apartheid fiction, namely the one of reshaping a present that is impregnated with remnants of a violent past while simultaneously seeking to counteract the consequences of blossoming capitalist development. While pondering the implications of magical realist strategies in South African fiction of the transition period, I will also point towards the possible origins of the proliferation of South African texts embracing this narrative mode in the period directly following the demise of apartheid as well as the possible reasons behind the gradual abandonment of magical realist strategy in post-millennial South African literature. Thus, this article will position South African magical realist texts at the intersection between literature of celebration and literature of disillusionment, emerging out of the short-lived co-

existence of the two literary trends in South African literary history. In this respect, the narrative mode's transitional properties will be discussed as they are manifested in three novels by André Brink: *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993), *Imaginings of Sand* (1996), and *Devil's Valley* (1998), as well as three novels by Zakes Mda: *Ways of Dying* (1995), *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995), and *The Heart of Redness* (2000).

For the sake of the following discussion, it seems crucial to provide a definition of magical realism. Pursuing a basic understanding of magical realism as a narrative strategy and a mode of narration, rather than a genre of fiction or a literary movement, my treatment of the term will follow Warnes' assertion that the principal defining quality of magical realism is that "it represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth" ("The Hermeneutics of Vagueness" 3). Thus, magical realist texts portray reality in which magical components grow organically out of the world depicted. It is therefore the very oxymoronic nature of the term, its internal polarity, in other words, this continuous dialectic between two seemingly opposing narrative codes—of realism and of fantasy—which "never manage to arrange themselves into any kind of hierarchy" (Slemon 409-10), that ensures magical realism's tenacity as a critical literary construct. Drawing on Amaryll Chanady's seminal study of the genre, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antimony*, Warnes identifies a three-fold classification of magical realism: "the magical realist text must display coherently developed codes of the natural and supernatural, the antinomy between these codes must be resolved, and a measure of authorial reticence must be in place in order to ensure that the co-existence and legitimacy of both codes is not threatened" ("Naturalizing the Supernatural" 6). As Warnes asserts, such a taxonomy allows for a successful differentiation between magical realism and its neighbouring genres. Indeed, fantasy, science fiction, and the fairy tale also combine realism and fantasy, but they do so within a setting so remote from our empirically verifiable world that the code of the real is underprivileged. On the other hand, modes such as the gothic novel and horror engage in a dialogue between the two codes only to present the supernatural as a source of anxiety or disquietude, thus patently favouring the realist

code. Thus, aiming at, in Irelmar Chiampi's words, "the denaturalisation of the real and the naturalisation of the marvellous" (qtd. in Warnes, "The Hermeneutics of Vagueness" 5), magical realism is the only literary mode in which the two codes retain equal status. The importance of the realist tradition is further marked by what Wendy B. Faris refers to as "a strong presence of the phenomenal world," evidenced in the material world being depicted in magical realist texts in all its detailed and concrete variety just as it is in realism ("Scheherazade's Children" 169). As a narrative strategy, rather than a genre or a literary trend, magical realism can be embraced by authors sporadically and with differing degrees of emphasis. I have selected the six novels under discussion precisely due to the authors' consistent employment of the magic realist mode of writing as displayed in the texts. Furthermore, my deliberate choice of writers of different ethnic affiliations only serves to prove that magical realism can indeed be viewed as a narrative of reconciliation creating space for the interaction of difference in a still racially polarised South African society.

As a biographical note prefacing *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) states, Mda's novels "have been acclaimed for their introduction of magic realism into South African fiction" (n.p.). Nevertheless, seamless interweaving of fantasy and realism can already be found in Wilma Stockenström's *The Journey to the Baobab Tree*, published in Afrikaans in 1981, as well as in Ivan Vladislavić's collection of short stories, *Missing Persons*, published in 1989, and in black writer Joel Matlou's *Life At Home and Other Stories*, published in 1991. Similarly, *The First Life of Adamastor*, Brink's first novel that appears to be at the crossroads of postmodern and realist conventions, though published in English in 1993, was in fact conceived in the 1980s and published in Afrikaans in 1988. Magic-infused *Imaginations of Sand*, Brink's first post-apartheid novel, was also published around the same time as Mda's *Ways of Dying* and *She Plays with the Darkness*. Thus, to credit one writer with the introduction of magical realism to South Africa appears rather simplistic. Nevertheless, both Mda and Brink evidently deserve acclaim for their consistent experimentation with magical realist forms in a number of their successive works. Indeed, each of the novels in question integrates what Faris calls an "irreducible element of magic" within an objectively



verifiable setting that perfectly corresponds to the general demands of realism (*Ordinary Enchantments* 7).

In *The First Life of Adamastor*, events that surpass the boundaries of rational explanation abound within a fairly realistic account of the main protagonist T'kama's journey into the South African interior. Torn-bushes suddenly appear, surrounding the camp overnight; a lion provides a tribesman with food; and T'kama's penis starts to grow uncontrollably until it is snapped off by a crocodile and substituted with a clay replacement that later turns into flesh. In *Imaginings of Sand*, the main character Kristien's grandmother's stories from the past are infused with events belonging purely to the realm of the surreal: Kristien's female ancestors could turn their sheep into stones, lost their shadow, left messages inscribed in the sand, and disappeared with their footprints simply stopping. Yet seamless incorporation of fantasy into the plot is not only confined to the past; it equally permeates the present story level. In the realistic context of South Africa's first democratic elections, omnipresent birds appear to attend to Ouma (Grandma) Kristina's wishes, ancestral spirits materialize at the graveyard and at Ouma's bedside, mysterious paintings keep reappearing in the mansion's basement, and after her death, Ouma disappears, turning into an unusual bird. *Devil's Valley*, on the other hand, is distinguished by the entire plot's aura of the supernatural. The very setting of the novel, a remote valley where a small community of Afrikaners who separated from the Great Trek settled and remained isolated for 150 years, seems rather surreal. Yet judging by the history of Afrikaner colonisation, such an object world, if somewhat nightmarish, does remain within the confines of historical realism. What does not, though, is the awareness of various female characters that continuously appear in the main protagonist Lochner's dreams, the presence of semi-animal, semi-human figures, as well as the harmonious co-existence of the community members with the dead. In his theoretical discussion of recent developments in South African literature, Brink has even asserted that "foregrounding of ancestors who continue to intervene actively in the affairs of the present, an easy gliding between the world of the living and the dead" ("Post-apartheid literature" 16-17) is an inherent component of a dis-

tinctly African form of magical realism that is rooted in the long tradition of African oral narrative.

Similarly, Mda's novels of the transition period bear evidence of an attempt at the "denaturalisation of the real and the naturalisation of the marvellous" invoked by Chiampi (qtd. in Warnes, "The Hermeneutics of Vagueness" 5). In the case of *Ways of Dying*, the equivalency in status of the real and the magical components is foregrounded in the novel's juxtaposition of harsh socio-political realities of a big industrial city's suburbs with the account of Noria's fifteen month-long pregnancies, the immaculate conception of her second son, her first son's reincarnation, her voice's inspirational and healing powers, and her schoolmate's premonition of death. Just as in *Ways of Dying* supernatural elements cohere around the female protagonist, in *She Plays with the Darkness* the magical seems to attach itself to the character of Dikosha. Dikosha's intermingling with the San dancers whom she conjures up from the rock paintings in the Cave of Barwa, Shana's death when he is engulfed by mist, Dikosha's telepathic feeling of his mortal pain, and a corpse smiling to point towards the love of his life all attest to the magic's privileging of the realm of women. This is not the case in *The Heart of Redness*, where dreamlike episodes exist to an equal extent in the conflicted worlds of Believers and Unbelievers. Yet these episodes tend to hold disparate meanings, being negatively charged for rational Unbelievers and neutrally or positively charged when attached to the world of Believers (Warnes, "Chronicles" 86). Thus, scars reappearing along the Unbelievers' male line are the family's burden to be carried by all the subsequent generations, and the unmediated visit of the San ancestors, far from heralding good news as it would normally, is rather aimed at the retrieval of their dance that was misappropriated by the Unbelievers for their "memory ritual" and results in severe punishment inflicted on the group. By contrast, the Believers are capable of putting magic into their own service. Birds carry out Zim's wishes and Qukezwa's immaculate conception only strengthens her bond with the main protagonist Camagu. In this respect, the Majola snake's visit auguring good fortune seems to locate Camagu within the Believers. Interestingly though, magical realism in *The Heart of Redness* is restricted to the present story

level. The “irreducible element of magic” does not materialize in the renderings of the cattle-killing movement, an important historical event of the 1850s on which the plot draws.

However, magical realist texts do not only work to subvert the perceived notion of the real at the content level. Indeed, historical realist narratives infused with dreamlike elements are repeatedly rendered using distinctively postmodern narrative techniques. Links between magical realism and postmodernism have been singled out by a number of cultural theorists. Whereas for Linda Hutcheon, “the formal technique of ‘magical realism’ [is] one of the points of conjunction of postmodernism and post-colonialism, [i]ts challenges to genre distinctions and to the conventions of realism [being] certainly part of the project of both enterprises,” (131) Fredric Jameson views magical realism as “a possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary postmodernism” (“On Magic Realism in Film” 302). Faris, on the other hand, has gone even further than Hutcheon by arguing for magical realism’s central position in any consideration of postmodernism, stressing the need to acknowledge the existence of “magical realist rooms in the postmodern house of fiction” (“Scheherazade’s Children” 175). The magical realist texts discussed here manifestly testify to this close association in the way they question our perceived ideas about time and space, in the way they foreground metafictional concerns, in their recourse to shifting focalisation, and in their reliance on syncretism and intertextuality.

Whereas in some instances clearly demarcated temporality constitutes a crucial aspect of the narrative of difference—as in the case of Brink’s *Imaginings of Sand* and Mda’s *She Plays with the Darkness* and *the Heart of Redness*—timeframes operative in *Devil’s Valley*, *The First Life of Adamastor*, and *Ways of Dying* are highly elusive and indefinable, truly in the postmodern vein. Even if the temporal setting is meticulously outlined—as it is in *Imaginings of Sand*, set specifically against the backdrop of the country’s first democratic elections in April 1994—the texts tend to question realist assumptions about time in their adoption of a non-linear, cyclical, and open-ended mode of narration characteristic of orature. Indeed, the story-lines of both *Imaginings of Sand* as well as *The Heart of Redness* move continuously both temporally and spa-

tially. Various spatial settings interweave, alternate accounts of the same historical events intertwine, and repetition is employed as a narrative principle. When discussing *Imaginings of Sand*, Brink conceded, “I did not want to write in a linear way. It was a fascinating challenge for me to try and imagine our history in a completely different way and from a different angle” (qtd. in De Waal, “A Time for New Imaginings” 4).

The postmodern influence is also striking in various forms of focalisation assumed by the novels. In *The First Life of Adamastor* there is a continuous alternation between internal focalisation in the form of T’kama, the first incarnation of the mythical Adamastor, and external focalisation through the authorial voice, which manifests itself most evidently in the introductory sentence prefacing each chapter and offering a synopsis of what is about to follow. Such shifting focalisation clearly strengthens the text’s self-reflexivity and foregrounds its metafictional character. Even the first person, supposedly omniscient narrator in the person of the investigative reporter, Lochner, who is the central character of *Devil’s Valley*, does not come across as trustworthy. Interestingly, when an omniscient narrator is employed in the works under consideration, like in the case of *Ways of Dying*, it is a first-person plural voice representing the whole community. Such a communal address once again clearly alludes to the performative traditions of African oral storytelling. Interestingly, Mda’s use of communal address simultaneously constitutes an insightful meta-commentary, thus further serving to foreground the text’s metafictional dimension:

We know everything about everybody. We even know things that happen when we are not there. . . . We are the all-seeing eye of the village gossip. When in our orature the storyteller begins the story ‘They say it once happened . . .’, we are the ‘they’. No individual owns any story. The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit. We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria. (Mda, *Ways of Dying* 12)

Michael Bell has even proposed that magical realism as a narrative strategy is best understood as a condensed manifestation of the literary as such. While acknowledging that the literary has been a threatened category, representing an elusive concept of “a literary density within fiction” (130), Bell stresses the need for the academy to recognise the category’s significance for any discussion of literature. Thus, taking magical realism as the expression of a highly sophisticated universality, he asserts: “The ‘magical’ and the ‘realism’ are both equally literary. Hence, along with the notions of ‘magical realism’ as either critiquing or expanding realism, one can also see it more directly and pertinently as foregrounding the literariness of the narrative” (129). Whether magical realism’s function can be confined to a mere concentrated image of the literary remains questionable. Bell’s proposal, nevertheless, points us towards yet another distinctively postmodern quality of magical realist fiction, namely its syncretism in the form of intertextuality. Each of the discussed texts resorts to myths, either myths that form part of the European literary canon (as does *The First Life of Adamastor*) or the beliefs of indigenous groups, such as Bushmen, Hottentot, and Khoikhoi mythology (which all of the novels do). The works under consideration equally draw on some core myths of Afrikaner identity (*Imaginations of Sand*, *Devil’s Valley*), as well as biblical tales (*the Heart of Redness*, *Devil’s Valley*, *She Plays with the Darkness*).<sup>2</sup> In Ato Quayson’s analysis of literary transformations in Nigerian fiction, recourse to native resources such as African folklore, myths, and legends is interpreted as a manifestation of “a will-to-identity” that “yields a simultaneous concern with the African nation-state as the implicit horizon, the political unconscious of the literary enterprise as it were, as well as a concern with projecting a viable identity outwards into the global arena” (17). Such a pervasive interweaving of strains from indigenous myths, African lore, and European-derived legends links to what David Damrosch termed the “like-but-unlike” provenance of literature, which is, he argues, what ensures a literary work’s international allure and recognition (12). According to Damrosch, “like-but-unlike” works tend to align the local content reflecting their immediate context with the transnational horizon of expectation by positioning localised ways of seeing as expressive

of universal concerns and rendering them by means of European-derived styles. Can the embrace of magical realism be therefore viewed as the authors' deliberate choice in order to secure their works' global appeal?

My assumption would rather be that it is precisely the mode's pronounced aptitude for "exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic" (*Magical Realism* 5) that makes it particularly successful in liberating South African literature of the transition period from the ghettoes of the apartheid imagination invoked by Nkosi, Sachs, and Ndebele. As I have mentioned earlier, it was already in 1987, in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, that Coetzee lamented the stifling, degrading effects that the apartheid system had on the intellectual and spiritual life in South Africa. He openly denounced the political pressures shaping the act of writing and the ubiquity of historical atrocities that "overwhelm[ed] and swamp[ed] every act of the imagination" (*Doubling the Point* 99). It was in that same speech that the author condemned the highly regulated relations between ethnic groups imposed by apartheid legislation as resulting in the "deformed and stunted inner life" of the South African society as a whole (98). It seems, therefore, that in the way magical realism straddles two narrative traditions, thus eroding generic boundaries, as well as in its perceptive demonstration of the inconclusive nature of truth, magical realism facilitates the deconstruction of any received discourses, including the oppressive ones, and in doing so, could help enable the restoration of the richness of South African inner life. The narrative mode's contribution to the reclaiming of the freedom of the spirit equally manifests itself in its capacity to activate readers, re-situating them as interrogators rather than recipients of delivered truths. In yet another interview dating back to the transition period, when pondering the incommensurable nature of history as well as freedom, Coetzee argues that it is precisely because of the way the overwhelming brutality of South African history tends to short-circuit the imagination that "the task [now] becomes imagining the unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of the imagination to start taking place" (*Doubling the Point* 68). Making an extensive use of the power of the

imagination, magical realism markedly provides tools for such a creative play to take place.

Thus, rather than being dictated by pragmatism, the authors' adoption of this particular mode of narration appears to stem from the transitional quality of the historical context from which the works arose. As Sandra Chait points out, the re-visioning of history in the form of deconstructing the inherited, dominant modes of discourse is essential for a society in transition: "The transfer of political power from oppressor to oppressed brings in its wake the appropriation and reworking of mythological material. As new governments rewrite their people's history, so too do their novelists and poets recover and re-vision the cultural identity embedded in their people's myths" (17). Drawing on a variety of sources that make up the modern South African cultural realm, including myths and magic-infused legends, employing two distinctive narrative modes "with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other" (Slemon 410), the magical realist texts discussed seem to adopt the basic principle of inclusion in their attempt to annihilate the privileging or totalising of any of the narratives depicted. In doing so, these texts clearly demonstrate that it is precisely in this wide pluralising of origins, in these "shreds and fragments [that come to us] in distorted form" (Slemon 17) that South African historical legacy lies. In this respect, magical realist narrative strategy might be viewed as particularly apt to address a certain paradigm shift, marking a transformation in the way history and fiction are perceived, a shift which, within the South African context, was instigated by the decline of apartheid. Given that literature in the apartheid era relied on historical evidence and officially-sanctioned accounts of the past as "an acceptable record of accessible reality," post-apartheid fiction explicitly embarked on the task of deconstructing this authority to expose the selective nature of South African historical discourse in its attempt to re-write a more representative history and, by extension, restore coherence to the fragmented South African society (Brink, *Reinventing a Continent* 232). In the process, the covert ideological quality of historical discourse was disclosed and history was shown as tantamount to fiction. Such an understanding of the difficult interaction between history and fiction corresponds closely

to White's theorisation of historical narratives as "verbal fictions" rather than representations of objective truth (*Tropics of Discourse* 82), as well as Marta Morello-Frosch's re-conceptualisation of history as a text that enables rekindling of new discourses via fiction (qtd. in Wenzel 72). Thus, exemplifying the post-modern refutation of fixed boundaries, serving as a useful instrument of critique of totalitarian discourses of all kinds, magical realism facilitates the ongoing dialectic between history as fact and history as fiction. This ongoing dialogue provides for an element of open-endedness, what both Mda and Brink seem to propose through their magical realist narratives is the revitalisation of "the largely submerged territory of the imagination" (Harris XIX). This argument is perhaps best summarised in the following observation of Kristien, the main protagonist of *Imaginings of Sand*:

The configurations may be interchangeable; the myths persist, she has lived them into being. Why demand the truth, whatever that may be, if you can have imagination? I've tried the real, and I know now it doesn't work. The universe, somebody said, and I know now it is true, is made of stories, not particles; they are the wave functions of our existence. If they constitute the event horizon of our particular black hole they are also our only means of escape. (325)

Thus, it becomes clear that the power of the imagination liberated by magical realism plays an important role not only in the re-construction of the past but also in opening up possibilities and choices contained in the present as well as in the future.

In her discussion of magical realism as a major component of post-modernism, Faris stresses the mode's position at the intersection of two realms—of the fantastic and the real— by invoking the metaphor of "a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions" ("Scheherazade's Children" 172). Well-attuned to address the near-merging of two worlds, the reconciling of worlds, spaces, and belief systems whose integration would be inconceivable in any other mode of fiction, magical realism clearly facilitates the engagement with this transformational moment in a country's history when the past and the future are brought together,



intertwining, thus locking the author and his audience between the two poles—the turbulent past and the hoped for, peaceful future. In his consideration of magical realism in film, Jameson suggests that “the articulated superposition of whole layers of the past within the present is the formal precondition for the emergence of this new narrative style.” As a narrative strategy, magical realism is thus “constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present” (“On Magic Realism in Film” 311). Derek Barker proposes even more specifically that “[t]he narrative strategy of magic realism is most apt when the subject matter treats of the struggle to re-shape an appalling present infused with contradictory ontologies and burdened by the continued effects of a traumatic past” (2). He goes on to assert that such a co-existence of disparate ontologies “is more than merely the old versus the new[;] it occurs where a particularly wide gap or incompatibility between ways of being” can be found (12). Following this line of analysis, I would suggest that the magical realism narrative mode as embraced by South African authors in the transition period of the 1990s proves exceptionally suitable to thematise two kinds of South African past: either 1) the distant pre-colonial period or pre-capitalist period of colonial settlement and armed conflicts (*The First Life of Adamastor*) or 2) the recent history of the transition period (*Ways of Dying*). Most interestingly though, guided undoubtedly by its principle of inclusion, magical realism actually turns out to be best-suited to thematise both types of history. *Imaginations of Sand*, *the Heart of Redness*, and *Devil’s Valley* all intertwine these two historical periods at the same narrative level: colonisation and the turbulent time of political transition to democratic rule. *She Plays with the Darkness* appears to be an exception here only because it is set against the complex background of political unrest and socio-economic transformations in Lesotho, a landlocked country surrounded by South Africa but clearly constituting a realm apart with its own specificity and distinctive concerns. My assumption is that such a marked preference for this particular dual temporal setting displayed in the majority of the works under discussion originates from the perceptual incompatibility of these two timeframes. Being either too distant and too removed or too recent, too proximate, and still evolving,

these two historical moments elude easy moral judgement and evade socio-ethical explanation.

When discussing the embrace of magical realism in Caribbean literature, David Mikics argues for the recognition of this narrative mode as a self-consciously historical form. He claims that

[m]agical realism realizes the conjunction of ordinary and fantastic by focusing on a particular historical moment afflicted or graced by this doubleness. Since magical realism surrounds with its fabulous aura a particular, historically resonant time and place, the theory of magical realism must supply an approach to history, not merely literary genre. (373)

Given the still open-ended character of the socio-political dispensation of the turbulent period of transition to democratic rule—and bearing in mind that pre-colonial and early colonial history of settlement in South Africa at that given moment, most significantly in the early stages of transformation, remained rather obscure, highly marginalized, and largely unexplored—these two temporal frames are markedly graced with such doubleness. Thus, far from being governed by the impulse to moralise reality—a symptom of realism—at this particular moment in history, magical realism seems to be one of few narrative techniques that allow for a nuanced problematisation of the past, a problematisation that can resist interpretive closure.

Remaining attentive to the challenges laid out by the processes of socio-political transformation, magical realism shuns easy solutions, and in doing so, it counteracts the amnesia so often inculcated in transitional South Africa in the name of forgiveness and reconciliation. Furthermore, by its advocacy of hybridity and exposure of the fabricated nature of historical discourses, this narrative strategy also endeavours to counteract the imposition of a new black-centered historical meta-narrative that could severely stifle the processes of transformation and reconciliation. Indeed, instead of offering readily available explanations and prepared answers, the texts discussed challenge the readers to confront their received assumptions about the nature of reality, and in doing so they bestow on their readers the freedom to draw their own

conclusions and produce their own meanings. Thus, magical realism proves to be particularly well-suited to, in Mkhize's words, re-situate the reader as "interrogator rather than recipient" of delivered truths (181).

Merging postmodern and neo-realist narrative techniques, conjoining black and white writing traditions in South Africa, blending African-derived belief-systems with Western modes of thought and perception, blurring boundaries between fact and fiction, and eroding divisions between the past and the present, magical realism appears to be a narrative of reconciliation par excellence. As such, its embrace by a number of South African writers in the period following the decline of apartheid might be viewed as corresponding to the literary trend identified by Stephane Serge Ibinga as "honeymoon literature" or "a literature of celebration" characterising the early years of democracy. Underpinned by a feeling of euphoria, eulogising the wonderful materialisation of the multiracial rainbow nation, "honeymoon literature" promotes the themes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) by foregrounding the importance of forgiveness, reconciliation, and identity reconstruction. Nevertheless, following the path undertaken by numerous post-colonial African texts, "honeymoon literature" was soon superseded by a literature of disillusionment. The euphoria attached to the first democratic elections having fast dissipated, the neo-liberal strategies of the new government having replaced colonial and apartheid policies as new mechanisms of oppression and exclusion in South Africa, some critics have even implied the emergence of a neo-apartheid dispensation (Mzamane 17). Indeed, a number of critics have pointed to a certain shift in socio-economic policy that the African National Congress has enacted since its seizure of state power in 1994 (Lazarus 612; Marais 105-06; Hart 1). The classically nationalist dimension of the ANC's political strategy under apartheid and the party's commitment to redistribution have now been replaced with a package of neoliberal socio-economic strategies that only strengthen the crisis and deepen inequalities that rank among the worst in the world. Neil Lazarus traces the origins of such a rearrangement of the party's commitments to the collapse of the Soviet system in 1989 and the ensuing global triumph of neoliberalism. Thus, he terms this readjustment in political strategy the ANC's turn to "glo-

balist thinking” (613-14). In this context, the topicality of the grand national narratives on the themes of forgiveness and reconciliation has faded. Instead, we can observe a shift in focus in South African fiction from the public sphere—from the national and the political—to the private, more intimate sphere of self-reflection, favouring introspective literature in which issues that have hitherto been only glossed over are now explored. Such a change in emphasis accounts, among other things, for the proliferation in post-transitional South Africa of autobiographies, memoirs, and other confessional modes of writing.

This paradigm shift has led a number of literary critics and cultural commentators to pursue the question of what constitutes South African literature in English beyond the year 2000 (see Chapman; Frenkel and MacKenzie; Flockemann; Kostelac; Medalie, Samuelson). While bearing in mind the fact that “phases of chronology are ordering conveniences, rather than neatly separable entities” (Chapman 2), remaining cautious of imposing definitive judgements on a body of work that is still evolving, they have all acknowledged that the South African cultural landscape is indeed undergoing a transformation. While Michael Chapman offers the phrase “post post-postapartheid” to designate the present wave of writing, Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie prefer to speak of the post-transitional phase in South African literature, and Miki Flockemann borrows the term “the second transition,” which was coined by Mark Gevisser, one of South Africa’s leading journalists.<sup>3</sup> While pondering the developments in Anglophone South African fiction beyond 2000, Flockemann identifies three literary trends associated with post-transitionality: the emphasis on the “little perpetrator within me,” in other words, the concern with variedly expressed manifestations of complicity with social injustice and prejudice; witness-bearing; and intertextual play (22). Whereas Sofia Kostelac observes contemporary South African fiction’s reduced commitment to the nationally sanctioned narratives characteristic of apartheid and transitional years, Meg Samuelson claims that rather than abandoning political engagement or turning away from the past, the evolving body of post-transitional prose actually rearranges the old chronotopes of South African literature in their focus on tracing connections between South Africa and the

world, as well as connections “between the (trans)national past, present and future” (116). David Medalie, on the other hand, posits that post-transitional South African writing is driven by utopian and dystopian impulses, where the past is revealed as a false idyll or “a dystopia masquerading as a utopia” (37). Indeed, many South African texts produced over the last decade are dystopian in the way they approach both the past and the present—and, on numerous occasions, they also project dimly into the future. One of the first novels to set the trend was without doubt the now canonical *Disgrace* by Coetzee, published in 1999. Yet there is also an emerging generation of young, “born free” writers whose works’ dystopian impulses can hardly be interpreted as embedded in the complexities of the apartheid past; such impulses stem instead from the writers’ disillusionment with their turbulent post-apartheid contemporaneity; Ceridwen Dovey’s *Blood Kin* (2007), Lauren Beukes’ *Moxyland* (2008) and *Zoo City* (2010), and Terry Westby-Nunn’s *The Sea of Wise Insects* (2011) are just a few examples.

Thabo Tsehloane views this dystopian orientation as testifying to what he terms “the end of history” dispensation in contemporary South Africa. Drawing on Francis Fukuyama’s theory outlining a global phenomenon, Tsehloane asserts that post-transitional South Africa projects itself as located at “the ultimate point of human social development which cannot be perfected by any form of social change” (80). He claims that after an extended period of anticipating the advent of a new order and the emergence of a new, united society that would supplant the much-maligned apartheid, South Africans experience a “struggle fatigue” or “hope fatigue” that precludes envisaging any further possibilities of socio-political change.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, South African society finds it impossible to conceive of a future different than its current situation or, in fact, to imagine any future at all, despite a deeply felt disillusionment with the present and widely marked longing for an alternative social condition. Thus, according to Tsehloane, the post-apartheid dispensation represents itself imaginatively “as the end of history which cannot be transcended” (80). The resultant narratives are highly ambivalent, equivocal about the new post-transitional condition, and highly dystopian in their future projections.

My claim is that, although imaginatively, formally, and thematically celebrating the notion of reconciliation characteristic of “honeymoon literature,” the magical realist texts discussed are actually located at the crossroads between literature of celebration and literature of disillusionment, emerging out of the short-lived coexistence of the two literary trends. In his perceptive discussion of magical realism as postcolonial discourse, “Naturalizing the Supernatural: Faith, Irreverence and Magical Realism,” Warnes distinguishes between two strands of magical realism: one, which he terms a faith-based approach, attests to the drive to valorise specific non-western belief systems and cultural modes of perception, whereas the other, referred to as an orientation of irreverence, testifies to the desire for parody, auto-critique, and self-questioning (8). Whereas the faith-based orientation might be seen as corresponding to what William Spindler calls “Anthropological Magical Realism”—one strand of magical realism in his three-fold typology, the strand that exposes the supernatural by recourse to “myths or cultural background” (80)—the magical realism of irreverence is more akin to epistemological skepticism.<sup>5</sup> While there are lines of traffic between the two orientations and in most magical realist texts these two influences overlap, Warnes’ claim is that it is one of the strands that usually prevails and only examining them separately will allow for a nuanced, analytically profound assessment of literary works. The magical realist texts by Brink and Mda discussed here blur boundaries between fact and fiction and critically juxtapose the past and the present, the traditional and the modern. The resultant problematisation of all of these categories, well-marked ambivalence in the way the narratives approach the current South African dispensation, their pervasive sarcasm, and the dominant ironic tone all testify to the fact that the writers’ position on matters of custom “oscillates between respect, distrust and outright satire” symptomatic of irreverence-based magical realism (Warnes, “Chronicles of Belief” 80).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the magical realist narratives produced in South Africa in the period of transition seem to constitute a nuanced auto-critique arising out of intensely felt dissatisfaction with the direction the socio-political transformation has taken. This satirical tone is most pronounced in the latest works produced towards the end of the period of the so-called

“first transition,” namely *Devil’s Valley* published in 1998 and *The Heart of Redness* published in 2000. Indeed, both works seem to constitute an acute auto-critique in the way they grapple with the different ways both white (*Devil’s Valley*) and black (*The Heart of Redness*) communities in South Africa have approached and engaged with the processes of socio-political transformation.

Recognition of this difficult, dichotomous, transitional position of magical realism in South African literary history might cast some light on the reasons behind the gradual abandonment of this narrative strategy in South African fiction in the years following the period of transition. Indeed, none of the post-millennial novels by Mda has employed the magical realist mode of writing to an equal extent as the works analysed in this article. *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), *Cion* (2007), and *Black Diamond* (2009) are not written in this mode. *The Whale Caller* (2004) deploys the mode, yet not as a defining narrative strategy. Of Brink’s post-millennial novels it is only in *The Rights of Desire* (2000) and *Praying Mantis* (2005) that the author sporadically embraces magical realist strategy. *The Other Side of Silence* (2002), *Before I Forget* (2004), and *The Blue Door* (2006) all signally lack magical realist narrative elements. Similarly, other South African authors renowned for their recurrent embrace of magical realism, such as Ivan Vladislavić or Mike Nicol, have gradually abandoned this narrative mode. Jameson’s discussion of realism and romance in the nineteenth century in his seminal work *The Political Unconscious*, and more specifically, the way Jameson’s theorisation has been adopted by Faris to conceptualize magical realism, might prove exceptionally helpful here. Positioning magical realism as an inheritor of romance, Faris invokes Jameson’s contention that the new romance’s “ultimate condition of figuration” is this transitional moment of suspension when two disparate modes of socio-economic development overlap. Since at this initial stage their disagreement is not yet socially manifest, the resolution of the conflict, which will necessarily follow, is still projected as “a nostalgic, or a utopian harmony, and hence is ultimately not politically progressive” (Jameson qtd. in Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children” 181). Might magical realism have been discarded by South African writers on the basis of its inability to exert

any significant political influence, its incapacity to help move the post-apartheid dispensation beyond the socio-economic stasis of the difficult transitional moment burdened with severe criticism levelled against the TRC hearings? Bearing in mind Tsehloane's observation that a large body of post-transitional writings reflect "a new context in which literary discourse has been disabused of grand illusions about its activist and transformative role in society" (80), one may indeed be inclined to believe so.

Wondering why magical realism has not taken root in the South African imagination, Ashraf Jamal interrogates:

Is this because aridity has defined our prose? Because, having cornered the modernist market of mid-twentieth-century seriousness and the morbidity that affixes itself to it, we have become terrified of playing fast-and-loose with the Western post-modern idiom, or the glamorous and larger-than-life South American, Indian sub-continental, or West-African surrealism; or because we have failed, fundamentally, *to learn the rich miscarriage that we are?* (18; emphasis in original)

I would also further enquire whether it is not because magical realism's transitional status as arising out of the clash between two opposing literary trends has right from the outset implied the narrative strategy's ephemerality in the South African context, its prevalence being as short-lived as the co-existence of the two mutually exclusive literary trends of "honeymoon literature" and "literature of disillusionment"? Or is this because the very theme of socio-political transition has lost its trenchancy in post-millennial South Africa and magical realism has proved incapable of offering useful political critique in the post-transition period? Because having imaginatively interrogated and re-invented the distant South African past of the pre-colonial and early colonial era, South African fiction has already cognitively mapped out this most promising realm of magical realist exploration? Or perhaps because the contemporary neo-apartheid dispensation of persistent socio-economic inequalities does not invite such a nuanced, cautious problematisation of political issues anymore, there is a need for more politically progres-



sive modes of fiction to emerge? Maybe circumspection is no longer needed when critically engaging with the public sphere in contemporary South Africa? Or is this because a new, black-centered historical meta-narrative that the magical realist novels imaginatively sought to subvert has now been well-established, its status having become unquestionable? Or does the introspective turn prevailing in current South African fiction preclude the employment of magical realism with the mode's realism-derived faithfulness to the socio-political context?

In order to counteract what he terms a “hermeneutic of vagueness” surrounding much of the current literary criticism of magical realism, Warnes advocates a critical approach “that attends to narrative technologies of form and structure, while also insisting that cultural and historical particularities be respected” (“The Hermeneutics of Vagueness” 1). His claim is that only a materialist point of departure, where each assertion's accuracy and appropriateness is measured meticulously against text and context, can effectively oppose much of the controversy, the prevailing confusion, and the vagueness accompanying theoretical discussions of magical realism. Examining textual complexities of form and structure while remaining attentive to cultural and historical specificities in an attempt to illuminate the motivations behind the deployment of magical realism in the texts under consideration, this article has endeavoured to adopt precisely such an approach. Nevertheless, following magical realism's predilection for a nuanced problematisation of cultural, socio-economic, and political issues, I would like to leave open the question of the reasons behind the gradual abandonment of the magical realist narrative strategy in contemporary South African literature, thus bestowing on the readers the freedom to draw their own conclusions and re-situating them as interrogators of reality in their own right.

## Notes

1. Some critics have pointed out that despite the claims that Ndebele makes for an innovative mode of fiction, his own collection of stories *Fools and Other Stories* (1983) remains solidly realistic and conventional in its narrative mode (see Vaughan and Parry). Yet I have chosen to premise my argument on Ndebele's concept for at least two reasons. While the time span between the publication of his collection of stories (1983) and his critical essays (1991) allows for a possible

- shift in his theory of fiction, I simultaneously agree with Atwell's argument that Ndebele's fiction constitutes "an experimentalism in which a process of epistemological recovery and revision is fully under way," thus perfectly illustrating what Atwell terms "the experimental turn in black South African fiction" (159).
2. According to Bell, on a world-historical scale, the Bible can even be viewed as "the most influential work of 'magical realism' in a colonial context" (130).
  3. In his usage of the term "the second transition," Gevisser refers to the close affinity between the socio-political situation in the years directly following the unbanning of apartheid and the current political dispensation, as many pressing questions of socio-economic nature remain unresolved.
  4. A similar point is made by Marais, who observes that as the ANC's policy-makers located the main source of oppression and injustice in the apartheid state, the key to liberation was perceived as lying "in the process of political transformation which centered on the winning of state power, and which would serve as a *deus ex machina*, enabling [the party] to gradually vanquish social and economic inequalities" (85). What would have to follow was hard to imagine, and as such was rarely raised in the political debates. Hart also notes that for much of its history, the liberation movement "focused on a single, cataclysmic event—the seizure of state power" (22).
  5. In his study "Magic Realism: A Typology" in *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 29 (1993), Spindler distinguishes three strands of magic realism: "Metaphysical Magic Realism," which explains the supernatural in everyday reality by means of "the technique of *Verfremdung*," (a technique associated with Brecht's theatre, which consists of creating an aura of unfamiliarity around familiar, everyday aspects of reality, aimed at arousing the spectator's critical judgement) (79); "Anthropological Magic Realism," which exposes the magical elements with reference to "myths or cultural background" (80); and "Ontological Magic Realism," which simply positions the supernatural as an intrinsic element of everyday reality, taking it for granted (81).
  6. Vladislavić has even suggested that "the grotesque is a South African speciality," invoking his indebtedness to numerous South African writers of the twentieth century for rendering the profound absurdity of apartheid race politics ("An interview" 60).

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