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Extraordinary events and primeval images : Magic realism in the works of Northern Sotho novelist O.K. Matsepe

Abstract

Fictive reality in the conventional novel is required to adhere to the laws of real life. Magic realism, however, presents a peculiar and unique world: a fictive but everyday reality, interspersed with extraordinary or 'unreal' events. In addition, primeval images or archetypes operate in the text, e.g. the image of happiness or paradise, of the father, of the wise old man, of the Messiah and of the eternal return. The art of O.K. Matsepe sufficiently displays these features to justify the conclusion that he may be regarded as a magic realist in the mould of Hubert Lampo and Gabriel García Márquez, among others.

1. Introduction

Cornwell (1990:40) classifies magic realism as part of 'marvellous'¹ literature, the subsection of which he defines as including "works set in what seems to pass for 'our' world, but with a single (or at least a small number of) element(s) of the manifestly impossible". This definition, like many others, highlights only the more obvious feature of this kind of

¹ Brooke-Rose (1981:233) refers to Todorov's basic division of the fantastic into three categories: (i) the *uncanny* - supernatural events occurring in the text are explained; (ii) the *pure fantastic* - in this case ambiguity exists as to whether the events have a supernatural or a natural explanation; (iii) the *marvellous* - here the supernatural is accepted. The latter category shows, in our view, correspondence with magic realism. Extending his basic division of the fantastic and relating it to realism, Todorov suggested a linear scheme which has the pure fantastic at its centre, with *realism* to the far left and the *marvellous* to the far right. Between realism and the pure fantastic he located the *uncanny* and the *fantastic-uncanny* with the latter bordering on the pure fantastic. Adjoining the pure fantastic to its right is the *fantastic-marvellous* which is adjacent to the *marvellous*. Schematically Todorov's categories may be represented as follows (read as a single line):

Realism | uncanny | fantastic-uncanny || pure fantastic || fantastic-marvellous | marvellous

Brooke-Rose (1981:84) proposes the interesting possibility of joining up the extremes of Todorov's linear model to form a circle, allowing the categories of *realism* and the *marvellous* to touch. With her proposal in mind Cornwell (1990:38) hints at positing a category of 'marvellous realism', which would, in our opinion, accommodate narratives in which extraordinary events are part of everyday reality, i.e. *magic realism*.

fiction, viz. the occurrence of unusual or extraordinary events amid everyday life situations. Hubert Lampo (cf. Bezemer, 1986), however, has pointed out another significant, though less evident dimension of magic realism: the operation of primeval images or archetypes in the text.

Magic realism is associated with Latin American, Canadian and Flemish narrative art, among others (Chanady, for instance, regards Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as magic realistic – cf. Cornwell, 1990:40). In this article I shall attempt to indicate that the art of Northern Sotho novelist O.K. Matsepe similarly displays the above features. By comparing some of his works to instances from two of the foregoing literatures, it is concluded that definite traces of magic realism are present in his oeuvre.

Fictive reality is required to adhere to the laws of real life. Although the novelist may invent facts appropriate to his characters and plot, he is not free to create an 'unreal' world. Brooks and Warren (1959:26) caution as follows:

In saying that the fiction writer can 'invent' his facts, we do not, of course, mean to imply that he is bound by no laws whatsoever. Obviously he must convince his reader that the story does not violate the probabilities of human action.

Magic realism, however, disregards this principle: the narrative artist takes the freedom to invent facts that even "violate the probabilities of human action". He is indeed free to invent uncommon or extraordinary happenings which seem incredible even within the fictive world he creates. Though an invention of the imagination, the narrated world of the kind of novel referred to by Brooks and Warren above, per definition excludes events which could be described as 'unreal' or 'fantastic'. While adhering to the laws of real life, the magical realist novel allows elements of fantasy into its fabric in a way that amazes the reader but does not urge him to question the validity of the particular fictive space. This may be ascribed to the fact that within the peculiar society depicted, those events that seem extraordinary to the outsider, may not be so 'unreal' after all. Segre (1988:190-191) rightly observes that "reality and unreality, possibility and impossibility are to be defined in relation to the beliefs to which the text refers". The author thus succeeds in blending reality and fantasy into an uncommon yet acceptable narrated world.

2. Extraordinary events

To illustrate the occurrence of extraordinary events in the magical realist novel, I wish to cite extracts from a Flemish and a Latin American narrative respectively. For purposes of comparison these will be followed by two extracts from Northern Sotho texts:

- "That's not the tower chimes", I said, perplexed, "all the bells of the carillon are playing. It's incredible at this hour of the night." I looked at my watch. "Twenty past one. I can't understand it; it's never happened before." ...

"That's out of the question," I replied. "The small carillon which chimes every quarter of an hour is mechanical, but only a carillonneur can play the big carillon. Anyway, you are right. The sound is unusually strong. I expect the whole neighborhood is awake by now."

Strangely enough, no one appeared to be surprised or worried by the unusual concert. Down in the street, the late passersby quietly went on their way, as if deaf. Not a light was switched on anywhere, no one appeared in the open windows and the others remained indifferently closed. ...

... He assured me that there was no question of the big carillon having been played last night. (Hubert Lampo: *The Coming of Joachim Stüller*, 1974:89-90; 100)

- ... Fernanda wanted to fold her Brabant sheets in the garden and asked the women in the house for help...

She had just finished saying it when Fernanda felt a delicate wind of light pull the sheets out of her hands and open them up wide. Amaranta felt a mysterious trembling in the lace on her petticoats and she tried to grasp the sheet so that she would not fall down at the instant in which Remedios the Beauty began to rise. Ursula, almost blind at the time, was the only person who was sufficiently calm to identify the nature of that determined wind and she left the sheets to the mercy of the light as she watched Remedios the Beauty waving goodbye in the midst of the flapping sheets that rose up with her, abandoning with her the environment of beetles and dahlias and passing through the air with her as four o'clock in the afternoon came to an end, and they were lost forever with her in the upper atmosphere where not even the highest-flying birds of memory could reach her. (Gabriel García Márquez: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1978:195)

- *Mahlo a bohle ba ba bego ba kgobokane fao a ile a lebelela godimo moo ba bonego eng ka ntle ga semaka fela? Thoko ya bohlabela go ile gwa rotoga leru leo le bego le šetšwe morago ke naledi ya mosela o motelele. Le be le šešo la dikela, ka gona, ba se kwišiše gore ba ka re ke eng. Leru leo le tlile ka boikello go fihlela le le dihlogong tša bona moo le ilego la letela naledi yeo e ilego ya tla ya iphihla ka gare ga lona. Gore e iphihla, go rotogile serupa sa magukubu a ba sa tsebe go gore a tšwa kae, a re go fihla, a phatlalala gare ga motse le gare ga bona, 'mme a thoma go topa le go metša ditaola tšela, morago ga fao a fofela bodikela a šetše leru lela morago, ya ba gona go sepelela sa ruri ga wona! (O.K. Matsepe: *Megokgo ya Bjoko*, 1969:44)*

The eyes of all who were gathered there turned skyward where they beheld an amazing sight. To the east a cloud was rising, followed by a star with a long tail. The sun had not set yet, therefore they did not understand what it could be. The cloud drifted on steadily until it was above their heads where it waited for the star which hid itself in it. When the star had disappeared in the cloud, a swarm of crows, which appeared from nowhere, arrived, dispersed through the village and among them and started to pick up and swallow those divining-bones, after which they flew away to the west, following the cloud and it was the last they saw of them.

- *Ka kgopelo ya gagwe [Kgotatši] kgomo ya mefago e ile ya tlangwa gabotse, gwa re yena a re o tla e hlaba. ... O ile ge a e batamela ka lesolo banna ba hlabile thedi, a re go e itia gabotse tlhabelong morithing wa letswele ba kwa motho a hlaba mokgoši a bokolela a itshwere tlhabelong a bile a pshikologa fase eupša kgomo yela yona e ikemetše e sa re tswetswee! (O.K. Matsepe: *Letšofalela*, 1972:167).*

On his request (i.e. Kgotatši), the beast to be slaughtered for provisions for the journey was tied securely, so that he could kill it. ... He approached it while the group of men were sitting on their haunches in respect, and as he stabbed it exactly where needed, in the shadow of the breast, they heard a person yell and scream, clutching his chest as he rolled on the ground while the beast was still standing unperturbed!

Each of the foregoing extracts represents a scene from a peculiar and unique world: a fictive but everyday reality interspersed with extraordinary events (cf. Grobler, 1989:300-301). "It is," says Wilson (1986:71), "as if there are two worlds – distinct, following dissimilar laws – which interact, interpenetrate, and interwind, unpredictably but in a natural fashion." This kind of reality, therefore, distinguishes itself from common reality by being a "mengeling van dagelijkse en magische realiteit" (Lampo, 1987:back cover). Hence the term *magic realism* denotes, according to Williamson (1987:45), "a narrative style which consistently blurs the traditional realist distinction between fantasy and reality". Ganguly (1987:173) maintains that the concept stems from the search for the relationship between fantasy and reality. In this process the imaginative interplay of myth, epic (real deeds) and utopia holds forth the writer's image of reality. It is obvious, as Hancock (1986:40) points out, that freedom of the imagination is a necessary requirement of magic realism.

Although 'reality' in the conventional novel is fictive, the created world has to adhere to the laws of real life to be accepted as credible by the reader. In the magic realistic novel this restriction is lifted: the world invented contains extraordinary events contradicting the laws of real life, yet it is so presented that the reader does not find it unacceptable. In this regard Schipper (1979:8) states that 'reality' as portrayed in fiction² is closely related to the norms and beliefs of the time:

Wat *waarschijnlijk* is, hangt af van de geldende normen in een bepaalde samenleving, in een bepaalde tijd. Dergelijke normen worden stilzwijgend aanvaard en hebben dan ook geen uitleg nodig bij een eigentijdse publiek: ze spreken voor zichzelf.

Williamson (1987:45) remarks with reference to Latin American fiction that

... magical realism expand[s] the categories of the real so as to encompass myth, magic and other extraordinary phenomena in Nature or experience which European realism has tended to exclude.

This view applies significantly to the fictive worlds of O.K. Matsepe and may contribute to a better understanding of the extraordinary events occurring in them. Gabriel García Márquez, renowned Colombian novelist, attributes the occurrence of magic realism in his art to the fact that "everyday life in Latin America shows us that reality is full of extraordinary things" (cf. Williamson, 1987:62, footnote 5). This may equally have been true of traditional Kopa society – the source of Matsepe's art – in which, as Hancock (1986:34,36) observes of Latin America, "the most important individual is the shaman, magician or medicine man" and which adheres to a faith that "includes an acceptance of the superstitious as part of daily life".

² According to Scholes (1981:7) *realism*, one of the principal ways in which fiction can be related to life, is a matter of perception. The realist writer presents his impressions of the world of experience and always seeks to give the reader a sense of the way things are, through a made-up structure of character and event rather than attempting to copy reality directly. We may conclude therefore that when the narrated world depicts a society which accepts the occurrence of extraordinary events in its daily life as normal, the magic realist writer reflects this belief in rendering a 'true' sense of the peculiar way things are. The reader as an outsider may view these events as 'unreal' or 'impossible, yet accepts them within the context of the uncommon fictive world on the authority of the narrator.

3. Hubert Lampo's views

I subsequently turn to the views of distinguished Flemish novelist, Hubert Lampo, which I will pursue in outlining instances of magic realism in the narrative art of O.K. Matsepe. Lampo explains magic realism as follows (Bezemer, 1986:14):

De alledaagse werkelijkheid is (dus) het uitgangspunt van de schrijver, maar binnen dat alledaagse gebeuren kan plotseling een spanningsveld ontstaan, waarbinnen zich buiten- of bovenwerkelijke zaken voordoen: het magische.

Besides the role of extraordinary events, Lampo adds another significant dimension to the concept. He believes (cf. Bezemer, 1986:15) that "magisch-realisme" has its roots in the ideas of Swiss psychologist Carl-Gustav Jung (1875-1961) regarding the existence of *archetypes*. These are primeval images or symbols originating from the unconscious of man. Jung (1986:3-4) distinguishes between the *personal unconscious* and the *collective unconscious*. The former is a more or less superficial layer which is a personal acquisition deriving from personal experience. The latter is a deeper layer which is inborn and is not individual but universal. In contrast to the personal psyche, the *collective unconscious* has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. The images or symbols show remarkable agreement with symbols from, for instance, old myths and tales. Comparison of the unconscious of human beings from different cultures and different centuries, subsequently gave rise to Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, the contents of which is made up of hereditary experiences all human beings have in common. These reveal themselves in the dream through conceptions or symbols, i.e. the archetypes, such as gods, witches, diviners and dwarfs, specific objects like the sword, as well as animals such as the fox and the lion. Archetypes also include, among others, the image of the father and the wise old man or the Great Mother, as well as the ideal conception every man has of the woman and vice versa (Jung, 1986:8,15,16). Based on the hypothesis of the collective unconscious, Lampo believes that the human psyche comprises a forgotten reality for which man is unconsciously searching (Bezemer, 1986:7).

For Lampo, magic realism comes into being during the writing process, through

een verdiepte en verruimde luciditeit, waarin ogenschijnlijk onbereikbare elementen van het onbewuste loskomen en naar verzoening met de bewust waargenomen en beleefde werkelijkheid streven (Bezemer, 1986:14).

This amounts, as he states elsewhere (Lampo, 1986:15), to the "manifestieren van archetypische elementen onder het schrijven of tijdens de incubatieperiode van een roman". He stresses the fact that magic realism is in the first place *realism*: as indicated earlier, the point of departure is everyday reality and it may take long before something extraordinary happens, whereafter daily life continues. Hancock (1977:5) underscores the prominence of everyday reality in this kind of fiction by pointing out that magic realists "place their extraordinary feats and mysterious characters in an ordinary place", the magic emanating "from the sparks generated between the possibilities of language and the limitations of physical nature".

During this kind of writing process, Lampo (1986:16) maintains, a completely different, new and totally internal reality is created in the mind of the author, and this is what he reports on. Lampo states:

Voor wie met het magisch-realisme wordt geconfronteerd gaat het er niet om of de opgeroepen toestanden en gebeurtenissen al dan niet in de objectieve wereld mogelijk blijken, doch wel of zijn in de subjectieve innerlijke wereld van de auteur waaragtig zijn.

It is therefore unfair to judge the extraordinary events characteristic of magic realism by the measures of the objective, everyday world, as they are not meant to be part of that world but of the subjective, internal world created in the mind of the author and reflected in the text. The reader accepts as sincere the author's intention to create an unusual world and he perceives it in this light. I have pointed out elsewhere (cf. Grobler, 1989) that Matsepe's works abound with the kind of extraordinary events under discussion, which occur suddenly amid everyday reality. The quotations cited at the beginning are only two examples illustrating the phenomenon.

4. Archetypes

The occurrence of extraordinary events within everyday reality may be taken as an external indicator of magic realism in a text. This is, however, not the only kind of evidence to look for when investigating magic realism. As pointed out earlier, another significant criterium is the operation of archetypes which is less obvious and may only be revealed through close study. I shall subsequently endeavour to show that Matsepe's fiction displays, apart from extraordinary events, some of the archetypes referred to by Lampo (cf. above and below).

Perhaps the most eminent archetype operating in Matsepe's works, is that of happiness, of paradise, for which man is continuously seeking (cf. Weck, 1973:22). Elsewhere (cf. Grobler, 1989; 1991) I have referred to man's yearning for a better dispensation – a phenomenon which could be said to constitute a motif in at least three Matsepe novels, viz. *Lešitaphiri*, *Megokgo ya Bjoko* and *Letšofalela*. To these I add his final work, *Mahlitse a Madimabe*. In all four novels the protagonists strive for happiness and peace, which is, however, not to be obtained in the worlds they find themselves in. The state of serenity they long for is beyond their immediate reach ...

... zoiets als de hemel, niet boven of op de aarde, maar elders nog, zonder dat het rechtstreeks iets met de dood te maken heeft. Het is als een heimwee ... (cf. Weck, 1973:24).

Matsepe's characters, in these works, seem to have to move to a different place of abode to find peace: in *Lešitaphiri* (1963) Tšhwahledi and Kgathola leave their place of birth and settle in a new area; in *Megokgo ya Bjoko* (1969) Maphuthe finds peace after being rescued following his miraculous survival from the fall down the precipice, and taken to a new place and a new life; *Letšofalela* (1972) ends with the peaceful coexistence of the one-time rivals after their move to Ntilatlane's place (cf. Grobler, 1989). In *Mahlitse a Madimabe* (1981) Seitshwenyeng is possessed by a strange longing for an unknown place which he sets out to find. This reminds of Kris Waterschout in Lampo's *De heks en de archeoloog* (1967), who is similarly occupied by a force which leaves him "ziek van heimwee naar een onbekende wereld, waarvan hy ook steeds de verlossing blijft verwachten" (cf. Weck, 1973:88). After

staying in a cave for many days, Seitshwenyeng follows directions he receives in a dream and ends up at the village of king Molobi. Following another dream, similar to that of king Molobi, Seitshwenyeng is introduced to the word of God by missionaries who visit Molobi's village. After some time he returns to his own people, qualifies himself as a minister of religion and exerts himself to spreading the gospel. Thus, only by going on a crusade into the unknown, driven by an inexplicable passion, does he find peace which he eventually shares with his people.

The disappearance and return of characters in several of Matsepe's novels may be related to the archetype of "de eeuwige terugkeer", i.e. "eternal return" (cf. Lampo, 1972:180; Weck, 1973:75). Cases in point are Seitshwenyeng in *Mahlatsa a Madimabe*; Boditsi in *Kgorong ya Mošate*; Maphuthe and Leilane in *Megokgo ya Bjoko* and Tšhwahledi in *Le-šitaphiri*. These characters all leave their familiar habitat, experience countless hardships in the unknown for a period of time and eventually return to their original environment with a particular mission.

In *Kgorong ya Mošate* (1962) as well as in *Mahlatsa a Madimabe*, we encounter the "Messias archetype" (cf. Weck, 1973:18-19,68) emerging in Lampo's *De komst van Joachim Stiller* (1960). Both Boditsi (in *Kgorong*) and Seitshwenyeng (in *Mahlatsa*) are destined to liberate their people, despite their temporary disappearance, which initially leaves the reader in the dark. The notion that they will eventually return is fostered by the firm belief of Tshetlo (Boditsi's father) and Thanthakedi (Seitshwenyeng's wife) that they have not gone forever. Tshetlo expresses his conviction in his final words as he dies in the arms of Nkabe: "Le tla phologa ka Boditsi", ('You will survive through Boditsi'). Thanthakedi declares her view by her steadfast refusal to mourn for her husband as she believes that he is still alive. She even dreamed of his return with some missionaries, but eventually she is forced to wear mourning clothes. In the end Boditsi returns (as Nkabe) to save his people from the hands of king Thibama who has subjected them. Seitshwenyeng returns to deliver his people from the shackles of darkness by offering them the light of the gospel.

It is interesting to note that Matsepe's invention of Nkabe as apparent double for Boditsi, resembles Lampo's technique in *Hermione betragt* (1963). Even his resolution of the matter seems similar to that of Lampo, about which Weck (1973:25) remarks:

Via een wat goedkope detective-agtige ontknoping blijken Denise Masurel en Désirée Chantraine dezelfde personen te zijn.

Matsepe's unmasking of Nkabe as Boditsi is similarly unconvincing and even unsatisfactory. Nkabe's actions and his very character too obviously resemble that of Boditsi, especially his association with the latter's relatives. His passionate affection for Tshetlo, Boditsi's father, is particularly suspicious.

Staying with *Kgorong ya Mošate*, I conclude by referring to the archetype of 'the wise old man', which, Lampo (1986:18) observes, is

rechtstreeks verwant met het vader-archetype, in feite de witte magiër, die over een beschermende kracht beschikt.

Tshetlo, Boditsi's father, represents this archetype. He reminds one of the man in the Quaker suit who acts as Kris Waterschout's guardian angel in Lampo's *De heks en de*

archeoloog (1967) (cf. Weck, 1973:18). Tshetlo is the wise old man who confidently predicts his son's return to liberate Letšaga's conquered people from king Thibama. Being a diviner, a practitioner of white magic (Lampo's "witte magiër"), he indeed seems to emanate some protective power which enshrines Boditsi and ensures his return.

5. Conclusion

O.K. Matsepe's narrative art abounds with extraordinary events which amaze the reader again and again. Close observation reveals the operation of archetypes in his fiction. This provides telling evidence of the presence of magic realism in his art. To the above may be added the destruction of chronology and the fact that the importance of time disappears, aspects with which I have dealt extensively elsewhere (Grobler, 1989). These have also been noted by Verzasconi (1965:78) in his study of the magical realist novels of celebrated Guatemalan artist, Miguel Angel Asturias. Janes (1978:31) similarly refers to García Márquez's demolishing of linear time and simple chronology in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (quoted earlier). Together the foregoing facts justify the view that O.K. Matsepe may be regarded as a magic realist in the mould of Hubert Lampo, Gabriel García Márquez as well as Miguel Angel Asturias and others (cf. Gérard, 1984:28).

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