

**LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES THROUGH UTOPIA: A MAGICAL REALIST READING OF
KOJO LAING'S *WOMAN OF THE AEROPLANES***

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Abstract

Magical realist writers employ utopia because it represents a fertile ground for extraordinary and magical actions and events. It serves to imagine solutions that are otherwise impossible in the rational world, while utopianism may threaten historical time. It can also provide the energy and vision for social change. Most critics and researchers usually dismiss magical realist writings as shallow and vague in response to this paper brings to light the usefulness of magical realism. For Laing, there is recourse to utopian solutions to the real problems of the contemporary world and this shows his faith in human capacity to achieve great things if given freedom to do what they please. What makes it possible for people to accomplish extraordinary things in a utopia world is the freedom they enjoy. Hence, in magical realist writings utopia presents an indispensable tool for political criticism for postcolonial writers who commit their literary works to attacking the political status quo in their countries as well as suggesting solutions for the amelioration of the conditions of living of the oppressed.

Keywords: magical realist, utopia, political criticism, oppressed

Introduction

Magical realism is what happens when the normal realistic setting is invaded by something too extraordinary to explain. Magical realism ruptures and stretches reality. It treats the supernatural like it is normal. It places it side by side with realism without any realm asserting greater claims to truth than the other. In magical realism there is a state of equivalence between supernatural and natural happenings. For, Faris (2014) "Magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seem to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (1). To Lois and Zamora (1995) "Magical Realism's most basic concern is the nature and limits knowable, magic realists texts ask us to look beyond the limits of the knowable" (21). This means that magical realism exceeds what is normal in the real world, it exceeds the knowable. Magical realism is a literary mode rather than a distinguishable genre. Magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a so-called rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality (H.P. Suma, 2018). Abrams (2012) opines that "these writers weave in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism in representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dreamlike elements as well as materials derived from myths and fairy tales" (257). Here Abrams brings to light the fact that magical realism involves myths and fairy tales. And the first set of African magical realist's writers incorporated this.

Laing depicts a desirable modernity in his fictions, which has placed limits on magic. His novels search for humanity, a mortality capable of spirituality in the modern world where the supernatural is on the wane. Laing was born in Kumasi, Ghana and then, unusually by comparison with the life histories of other African writers, in Scotland, where he afterwards took a degree at Glasgow University. If Okri's paradoxes are shaped by his long, voluntary residence in London, if Cheney-Coker's uniqueness is the product of his Creole past, then Scotland is one of the sources of Laing's often exciting, cosmopolitan regard for international syncretism. This may be so, not least of all, perhaps because Scotland is itself in many ways culturally and economically peripheralized (Cooper 2004)

Magical realist writers employ utopia because it represents a fertile ground for extraordinary and magical actions and events. It serves to imagine solutions that are otherwise impossible in the rational world, while utopianism may threaten historical time. It can also provide the energy and vision for social change. "Specialization, then, whatever it may take away in the capacity to think time and history,

also opens a door onto a whole new domain for libidinal investment of the utopia and even the proto political type” (Jameson, 1991:160).

The energy released in the imaginings of ideal places, freed from the stresses and entirety of reality, is paradoxically a ‘proto-politics’ if utopianism characterized the sixties the flower children’s peace sign a weapon against Vietnam – then flower power has undergone a rehabilitation in the era of postmodernism and post colonialism. Utopia has become an imagined alternative to racist imperialism and its corrupt legacies, a device for postcolonial writers who refuse simply to abandon the political. What Jameson (1991) says about surrealism surely applies to magical realism. “The utopia vocation of surrealism lies in its attempt to endure the object world of a damaged and broken industrial society with the mystery and depths, the magical qualities...of an unconscious that seems to speak and vibrate through those things” (173).

The ‘object world’ of the magical realist is not so much a damaged industrialism; it is rather the uneven transportation of this twentieth century industrialization to the third world.

These Africa writers therefore bring to light the abuse of power of some African leaders and privilege classes. They empathize with the impoverished masses; they therefore construct solutions in the form of utopias, which may be anchored in mythical pasts.

In answering a question about the ways in which his sojourn in Scotland has influenced his portrayal of European culture in his fiction, Laing has commented:

I fell in love with the hills and isolated streams, pines, mist etc. My acquaintance with Europeans was already extensive in Ghana before I left for Scotland. I view people without color except for specific purposes, artistic or otherwise. I married a Scotswoman but have been living in different continents since 1981.

I made no emotional difference between European literature/art and the African equivalent (Interview, May 1995).

Laing’s cosmopolitan positioning, however, is increasingly at war in his fiction with the more familiar quest for the healing myths sought within an idealized African, pre-colonial past. The researcher will be able to substantiate this claim in *woman of the Aeroplanes*.

Analysis

Woman of the Aeroplanes is situated within the relationship of two towns – Tukwan in Ghana and Levensvale in Scotland. Both towns reject the corruption and racism of their respective counties at large, but only because their inhabitants are, in a sense, not human – they are immortal, much like the gods. The novel charts the process by which the inhabitants of both towns become mortal and enter historical, rather than eternal time. This new found mortality and humanity carries enormous consequences which the novel explores.

On the very first page of this novel, the author brings to light the central point of his novel; and this is that firm belief that if a man frees himself from any pre-given conditions such as race, history, and nationality, he will enjoy these limitless possibilities that surround him. Even though Laing does not completely reject the influence of human’s past in his present and future life, he does affirm that what man becomes is largely dependent upon his own efforts. The inhabitant of Tukwan, the banished and invisible utopian town, have courageously refused to listen to “all the songs of the ancestors”, because they want the freedom to shape their aspirations. In doing so, they totally reject the notion of predetermination that is believed to inform the now and here of people.

As mentioned before, the novel presents two communities, one in Ghana and the other in Scotland. The two communities inhabit, respectively Tukwan and Levendale, both invisible to their surrounding towns. The inhabitants of Tukwan are immortal and live extraordinary lives, as shown by the use of wonderful characters in the book by the author: There is Pokuaa, a buy-and-sell woman who perfumes her airplanes every morning with frangi pani lavender. She is the mistress of two small aeroplanes which

both stand at the level of her lips (4). Moro, who dreams to co-rule Tukwan Nana Bontox, dresses his Mercedes Benz in Blue underwear, plastic, to keep the world away (7). There's Tay, the Lawyer, who in the absence of crime, makes up and defends cases against himself; he proposes a decree banning all expectations of the immediate future (9). Kwame Atta, the inventor, who often tries to shed his body to let a better person occupy it; he invented the stupidity machine that reveals the truth about everyone's past, and his twin brother Kwaku, who is so burdened by goodness that he walks with a stoop (2-3). And Kofi Senya, the spiritual shrine master who smokes his pipe with a vulture perched on it (2). In Tukwan, yawns and laughter can be collected by a tractor and measured, to be allowed to keep staying in the town everybody had to possess an element of originality (759).

As the novel progresses, Laing embarks his reader in a journey made possibly by Pokuaa's aeroplanes, to Levensdale, Scotland, for business. The planes have trailers loaded with local products cassava, palm nuts, goats, chicks and like for the purpose of export. Levensdale in Scotland, like Tukwan, is banished and forgotten by progress.

In this town the reader is presented with another group of bizarre characters like old Alec the bogey, who tries to auction his genitals for the price of a bottle of malt Whisky (64). What these marvelous life styles reveals is that when human beings are free from all influences, they are capable of dreaming big and achieving extraordinary thing. The central concerns of woman of the *Aeroplanes* are unity and change both of which are achieved through the miraculous journey under taken by the inhabitants of Tukwan. What makes this achievable is Laing's adoption of utopia. Coined by the English Lawyer, social philosopher and author Thomas More, Utopia has diverse meanings. It plays on two Greek words, Eutopos, 'a good place; and Outopos, 'no place'. It has been seen as a program for an ideal state, a contemplative vision of the ideal, a satirical look at contemporary European society and a humanist jeu d'esprit.

Laing's recourse to utopian solutions to the real problems of the contemporary world shows his faith in human capacity to achieve great things if given freedom to do what they please. What makes it possible for people to accomplish extraordinary things in a utopia world is the freedom they enjoy. For example, in Tukwan, "The Lake is adjusted, merely by pulling the ripples, so that it could come nearer the meeting and interrupt the wisdom if it got too much" (14) "Lies were temporarily suspended", and "The sun has been adjusted to clear the lake of reflections" (40-41). Time has been turned in cycles: "If you go too slow, one cycle will catch up with you; if you go too fast you will bump into another cycle that is not ready for you" (151). "Urines are used to lift planes" (104).

Nana Pokua, the powerful mother of Tukwan is credited with miraculously bringing the planes to Tukwan from the UK. The residents of Tukwan owe their business trips to Levensdale to her, because without these aeroplanes, nobody could have travelled. Laing believes that "Tukwan is realistically possible in terms of cross-cultural interchange" (qtd. In cooper, 195).

However, for this cross-cultural interchange to materialize, there needs to be a contact between the cultures involved. A possible contact between Tukwan and the outside world presupposes a "travel inner and travel outer", this necessitates a means of transportation, which Pokuaa has provided the town with. The reader learns that "the planes were owned in trust for the town by Pokuaa: she bought them, and had arranged for the town to buy them back by exporting palm-nuts and cassava to a sister town in the UK. She was prepared to take anything up in the sky to let the town prosper" (5). Also, the reader later learns that:

People were skeptical about Pokuaa's intentions until she miraculously brought the Aeroplanes. Now they were waiting patiently for one great thing: to make a journey to the sister town, Levensdale, a journey that they hoped could lead to prosperity. The shrine said that travel was necessary, bhut that those to travel had to be carefully chosen. (5)

The extracts above present two opposing events, one rational and the other irrational. If the transactions that led to the acquisition of the aeroplanes are normal and explainable, their miraculous arrival at

Tukwan supposes a supernatural intervention. What makes this interaction between the realistic and the magical possible and acceptable to residents of Tukwan is that their world is simply a utopia. Indeed, utopia enables Laing to create a world of limitless possibilities. Tukwan and Levensvale are utopia towns which exist outside time and their inhabitants enjoy immortality.

Woman of the Aeroplanes encourage inclusiveness, a mixture of opposites, abolishing the opposition between rational and irrational by integrating magic into science, tradition into modernity, morality into literature. Utopia, according to Garcia Marquez enables man to live in the world where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where genuine love and happiness are possible, and where all the oppressed races are offered a second chance on earth (qtd in Schroeder 46).

Utopia, hence, presents an indispensable tool for political criticism for postcolonial writers who commit their literary works to attacking the political status quo in their countries as well as suggesting solutions for the amelioration of the conditions of living of the oppressed. In an attempt to contextualize the emergence of utopia in postcolonial African literature, Cooper draws a parallel between *Woman of the Aeroplanes* and Raymond Williams' "Utopian and science fiction". According to her, Williams deals with the generation of Western radical whose privileged position enabled them to witness the lies and corruption of the rich and powerful people. These radicals were inspired to learn and imagine the condition of the excluded others. As a result, they opted out of the privileged position to join the marginalized, to become materially poor and thereby gain a clear moral advantage. For Cooper, this description fits the African writer intellectuals very well. She writes:

They see the abuse of power by some African leaders and privileged classes, also with an insider's eye given their access to these classes through their own privileges and status. They too empathize with the impoverished masses, from whom, however, those privileges separate them. They therefore construct solutions in form of Utopias, which may be anchored in mythical pasts and secured from others by string moats and walls; or perhaps they are Utopias' steeped in magic, where borders are entry points which embrace change. There is Soyinka's Aiyero in *Season of Anomy*, Achebe's Abazon in *Anthills of Savannah*, Kojo Laing's Tukwan and Levensvale in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (194).

Cooper is of the view that postcolonial African writers employ utopias that are steeped either in African mythical past or magic to provide solution(s) to the complex post-independence dilemma. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, it is not easy to disentangle Laing's real world of the novel from the utopia. For as Deandrea warns, 'instances such as movable lakes, pen writing on their own, rains falling upwards, Aeroplanes with sentient noses, to list only a few, should not be taken as merely metaphoric constructions, be they symbols or hyperboles because they really exist and occur in the action of the novel' (94). Thus, the two Aeroplanes that make the trip to Levensvale may be imaginary to some readers but in Laing's utopian world they are real. The same way Laing uses language to create unity in the world he uses the flight motif to transcend the geographical boundary between Africa and the west. In this novel, flying becomes a means through which Tukwan achieves its humanity; since Tukwan can reach other parts of the world by flying, it reciprocally avails itself to external visits. Laing firmly believes that Africa in general and Ghana in particular can no longer avoid contact with the outside world, because Africa and Ghana need to reach out to the world to initiate any racial relationships that will help them to meet the challenges of the millennium development. At the same time, flying makes it possible for Africa and the West to meet and complement each other, thereby closing the fixtures that separate them. This reaffirms Laing's argument that the future of humanity lies in the willingness of people from all parts of the world to go out meet and exchange with other people in order to allow the construction of new and individual identities of Tukwan and Levensvale; they need each other to become whole. Cooper notes that "Tukwan nor Levensvale can achieve their humanity or their material well-being without the other. Tukwan alone is only half utopia" (204). Laing when asked if Tukwan is a utopia, a dream or an embodiment of an alternative politics he insisted that "Tukwan is realistically possible in terms of cross-cultural interchange. In terms of hope, it is a realizable utopia" (Cooper 195).

Conclusion

Laing's message in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* suggests that Ghana's destiny is in its own hands. In other words, its destiny depends on its ability to transform itself with useful materials from its past as well as open itself to changes in the world. Laing neither calls for a total abandonment of the old ways, nor an uncritical ingurgitation of everything new. In Tukwan, "it was generally agreed that new things were as wise as the old, and that the opposition between the two was welcome and controllable" (27). Laing wants a confrontation between old values and new values. This confrontation is an important part in the process of invention of what is authentic. He envisions a society that is neither a photocopy of the old nor a photocopy of the new; rather he projects a society that is capable of forging its own destiny by keeping the best of the old and combining it with the best of the new. He believes that this material is already there, what is needed is Ghanaians willingness to transform it according to the need of the moment. He does not want Ghanaians to consume things they have taken no pain to produce.

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