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MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHER NATURE: A STUDY OF MYTH AND MAGIC THROUGH AMITAV GHOSH'S AND WAYÉTU MOORE'S SELECTED WORKS

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Abstract:

Contemporary thoughts in the fields of literature and science lead to an interdisciplinary effort to bring along the issues common to both disciplines involved. The post-colonial and post-modern era of literature see literature and society along and literary exponents stamp their responsibilities to take up the serious societal crises and bring the awareness arousing a socio-consciousness in the reading public. This paper tight spots magical realism as one of the experiential tools employed by authors, Amitav Gosh, an Indian writer and winner of the 54th Jnanpith award and Wayétu Moore, a Liberian-American author and entrepreneur, to discuss the contemporary issues such as immigration, climate change, enslavement, etc through the employment of myth and magic. Environmental Humanities is best explained with the advocacy of magic realism. Of all the important supernatural elements, (which is the formula of magic realism) presented in both of the selected novels, *Gun Island* (2019) and *She Would Be King* (2018), this paper in detail, deals with only two components that are common in both the texts. They are i) the omnipotent natural force, wind and ii) the most powerful and dangerous species, snake. Both of these components are presented as commanding aid of the two literary texts to progress towards the solution to the catastrophic environmental complications. Both novels employ characters bitten by poisonous snakes, attaining extraordinary powers and also one can witness the power of wind, as omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent natural force. This paper is comparison of collective unconsciousness of two authors and their artful works irrespective of their genders, age and geography.

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1.0 Introduction:

Magical realism as a literary technique in fictional narratives, is an effort of involving series of mysterious happenings, not ordinary trivial occurrences, or to be concise, it is a broadcast of multiple episodes of supernatural events. It incorporates both earthly daily occurrences and the out-of-the-world super powers that a writer designs upon his or her characters. Maggie Ann Bowers delimits the term magical realism as “anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational sciences” (Bowers, 2007, p. 20). Holgate (2019), also refers that, Magic Realism creates impact in both world literature and ecocriticism, as it devotes apparitional writings to insist on strong impact

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on the desired approach to the environmental and social issues. His claim is that magical realism is an international style of writing that has unavoidable links with environmental literature. One has to accept both magical perspectives of literary texts and the rustic truth realistic life, as they both go hand in hand in this contemporary era and the conversation has become an interdisciplinary subject which studies literature, ethnography and other similar subjects along with environmental crises.

This paper examines *Gun Island* and *She Would Be King*, in a perspective that how nature as a part of environmental discourse becomes a tool to the novelists to employ magical realism and their weaving of literary tools with the special thread of magical realism. Most importantly the texture of their weaving lies in the colourful representations of mother Nature. Animal Studies, an upshot of Environmental Humanities views the portrayal of non-human animals not as mythical and animated characters but in their reality of sufferings and suppression (Robles, 2016). Therefore, the phenomenal works of Amitav Gosh and Wayétu Moore are linked with the scientific rationalism that resorts to elucidate the subject matter with the help of magical elements in studying human and non-human and in examining various ways of literature treating nature and its subject. In terms of Watt, as referred by Bowers, our senses eventually assume the reality in external world that something has existed or should have existed. The beauty of a novel lies in artistic crafting of incidents as predominantly realistic though it may involve various deviations like romantic or gothic or magical realist elements, and is kept in par with the nature (Bowers, 2007). One such brilliant craftsmanship can be the consequence of these novels *Gun Island* and *She Would Be King*, hereafter, *GI* and *SWK* respectively.

Amitav Gosh, as an experimental writer, has dealt with all sensitive issues that the modern world witnesses nowadays, such as immigration and climate change, the tormented relationships, relationships that are still unaccepted by certain communities, portrayal of subaltern and minorities, and dominatingly, the beliefs and cultural practices that certain community still possess about their homeland. Likewise, in her debut novel, Moore has brought all her artistry, designing the plot with the characters so strong which blend intensely with and among other techniques such as narration, portrayal of the plight of the characters, scouting history in, and particularly employing magical realist technique without forgetting to attach the storyline with ecological aspects. The skill of Moore lies in her workmanship of touching the history but through establishing magical realism. Whereas, in contrast to Moore, Ghosh has indirectly scorned against the world politics; the cruelty of mankind in imposing a sacrificial existence of animals (Derrida, 2008), deprived of claiming their rights and at times, the treatment of fellow human beings in lesser order than that of animals by insulting and erasing their traces.

Besides the documentation of environmental crises and nature's destructions, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* is a product of myths and legends, which characterises snakes as superlative and powerful species and has been identified, from the belief of Indians, as a form of Deities, and Ghosh crafts a myth that he has heard as a story during his childhood days through his grandmother and other relatives. While travelling across the globe, he connects those stories to real historical truth of spatial diffusion which might have happened in Venice from the swamps of Varanasi. Deen (Dinanath Dutta), while narrating the story, catches the mindscape of the readers to experience the geography and history of the places such as Varanasi and Venice. Deen, along with the female characters, Cinta (an Italian academic) and Pia, (a microbiologist and a character from Ghosh's *Hungry Tide*) unknots several puzzles from the story (quite a couple of versions) recited by the swamp dwellers of Lusibari Island, regarding the settlement of a Gun merchant who is said to have travelled to Venice in the 17th century. By the same token, the entire novel of Moore is a spark from a simple folktale told by her family elders as bedtime stories of a

murdered cat returning to take revenge of its murderer. Moore's grandmother habitually recites a story of a cat, which was accidentally and mercilessly killed by its owner and the cat's ghost haunts the old lady. In order to tell the children of next generation to empathise with other species of the world and treat them as their equal. Moore takes up this childhood moral with which she has included the respective transgressive natures that dismantles the binary themes like human and non-human plus natural and supernatural.

2.0 Collective Unconsciousness in Amitav Ghosh and Wayétu Moore:

This paper attempts to bring out to light the similarities between the writers and their responsibility to handle the social issues in their unique techniques and style of narration. Two such important equivalences from the selected works predominantly pose nature, culture and history in the same string. One, the great natural force, wind – as a prime agent and the narrator of the novel *SWK*. The Wind is portrayed as omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent but only as a supporting agent in *GI*, yet as an instrument to relay the climatic change. Secondly, the luxuriating snakes, particularly the mythical Manasa Devi, a commandingly dominant element in *GI* that is associated to myths and legends and as a species to be studied with care. And as a minor, yet game-changing agent in *SWK* as Gbessa gets magical powers after a fateful Viper bite. Environment being a central theme in magical realism, these novels are pregnant with the whole kit and caboodle of powerful literary techniques showcasing history of born anew Liberia (*SWK*) Varanasi and Venice (*GI*). As magical realism requires a unique narrative mode, and it implements a different way of thinking, it cannot be kept in a tight rein on geographical location neither can the plot or themes or episodes be kept simple. It has to be extravagant and exaggerated or it should be completely kept higher than the ground level or lower than the water level.

More interesting aspect is that the novels are loaded with numerous magical and supernatural elements which are resorted to nature. In *SWK* the plot line cannot be separated from nature as the novel is narrated by wind, which is the upshot of the ghost of Charlotte, a slave girl who dies in rescuing another slave girl from their tyrannical master. She takes the form of a wind. One could sense the omnipresent wind, as it travels throughout the novel along with the characters closely watching their moves, escorting them to travel to the next step. "I was there that day, drawn to her, just as I was....those to gifted others" (*SWK*, p. 9). All the time the wind was following Gbessa, a believed- to-be-cursed girl, who survives even after being bitten by a snake, from the forest to Monrovia, then to Jamaica and also into her second life in America.

Gbessa is considered cursed but she had the gift of immortality. She is believed to have this supernatural power as she was born the same day when Nyanpoo, one of the village's old ladies, killed her cat mercilessly for stealing her fish and the cat's ghost came for revenge by bringing her roof down to the ground thereby taking the life of the old lady. Hence, the red-haired Gbessa is exiled to a forest as a punishment, believing that she would die at the hands of nature but fortunately she survived, as nature had a soft spot for her, she explains her friend Safua, "No. I witch. Woman named Nyanpoo kill her cat the night I was born.... I won't die" (*SWK*, p. 174). Snakes and serpents are used in legends, folktales, myths and stories from the day man invented literature. Derrida spots in his *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, that the serpents are, "...the animal's behind, (while referring to a chimaera) the part that is at the same time the most fabulous, the most chimerical, like the dragon, and also the most cunning genius of the animal, the evil genius as animal, perhaps" (Derrida, 2008, p. 46). But most of the mythologies originated from the nations, over populated with varied species of snakes have portrayed snakes and serpents as gods, more vibrantly as goddesses and Deities (symbolism-snakes-literature, n.d.). Particularly in African and Indian mythologies which share same kind of notions of snakes used vividly as they allow similar

cultural practices. Because the landscapes, waterbodies, swamps, mountain ranges, forests and jungles are similar among the two nation's mythologies(Malinga, 2003).

Likewise, the beliefs like black magic, possessions, tarantism are also common in similar communities worldwide. Literature, from the time, as Derrida (2008) refers, the time before time was invented (p. 17) of Genesis, like nature is one with the presence of serpents and snakes. Starting from Milton's 'Satan', through the 'Kaa' of Rudyard Kipling and to 'Nagini' of J. K. Rowling etc are creatures symbolising enormous genius strengths of human minds which are still elaborated by Derrida as "from material things by the fact that he has consciousness, that he is an animal endowed with reason..." (p. 148)

3.0 Myth and Magic:

In *SWK*, a black viper snake bites Gbessa, during her exile in the forest. It is after this fateful incident Gbessa acquires immortality. "Gbessa first had to get rid the road of a slow-moving snake. Greenish brown with golden eyes as difficult to gaze into as the sun, the snake's body was no different from the bushes it had crawled from..." (*SWK*, p. 9). When Amitav Ghosh in his interview to *The Hindu* was asked about his employment of human/non-human issues in the book his answer to M. Kapoor is as follows:

... we are seeing is an upheaval that is overturning everything that we ever knew about the world, everything is changing... the primary literary challenge of our time is to give voice to the non-human. ...Those boundaries never existed. Even ... Greek mythology, it is filled with non-humans of many different kinds...a kind of inspiration to go back to the literatures ... It is really true that often you can find in the past sources of regeneration,... (Ghosh, 2019)

Like a snake shedding its skin and renews itself, Gbessa renews herself after the snake bite. She gets enormous strength that she outlives all her mortal challenges. Similarly, like a snake spreading its hood wide, *GI* presents snakes in a wider perspective. Like Gbessa, the red-haired girl acquires immortality, Tippu, the swamp dweller, who fascinates the western culture acquires visions after a gigantic king cobra bites him in the shrine where Deen goes on scrutinising the secret behind the myth of the snake goddess, Manasa Devi. Rafi, another islander of the gun merchant's swamp, knowing some secrets about the myth, which his grandfather had always told him, whispers to Deen as, "it was right behind you... its hood was raised and its head was above your shoulders... I leave it alone too – it keeps other snakes and animals away...you must have disturbed it when you went in." (*GI*, p. 176). Since the snake bite, Tippu gets aberrant seizures and visions that he mentions the name, Rani, an Irrawaddy Dolphin which died due to beaching in an unexpected place and wrong season. It was the same time that Pia, the microbiologist lost signal with the species and later found it dead. "about forty-five minutes ...that's impossible! ... but that's when my alert went off ... about Rani..." (*GI*, p. 189).

Tippu's whispers and warnings about Rani and later cautioning Deen about his expected encounters in the Ghetto of Venice, in *GI*, can be compared to the wind, the narrator of *SWK*, which always whispers a song – "...take care my darling..." She always protects, cautions, pacifies June Dey, the super powered boy born to the ghost of Charlotte, during his tough times. "...a sudden blast of wind....Run with me my son....he sprinted with the wind" (*SWK*, p. 87) and pities Norman Aragon, a boy with the power of vanishing, when his mother was killed in the boat to Africa.

The wind then becomes omniscient, the wind while taking the shape of an old lady, the figure of real Charlotte, who was visible to June Dey's eyes as Kilimanjaro, says proudly, "I know

everything... all the languages, all the people, all the land" (SWK, p. 288) when he doubted her speaking of his past life as Moses, Darlene's son. Kilimanjaro was sure that the real name of June Dey was not Moses. Like wind travels throughout SWK, snake travels throughout GI. There is a mention of yellow-bellied snake which bites Gisa's pet dog. But it is presented in an ecological perspective that it is sensed that these species are endangered. The narrator Deen, travels to various places in search of truth about the myth that he hears about Manasa Devi, the snake goddess and her devotee, the gun merchant or *bonduki Sadagar*, who built a shrine which stands as a concrete source for the stories that Deen has heard. Deen relates that "the legend might apply also to the history of its existence in my own memory... whether the legend might have surfaced in my mind because I was myself then living through the most turbulent years..." (GI, p. 7). Deen connects the myth with magic as he narrates the rest of the story connecting the incidents to the myth and he also believes that the myth recurs in his life in reality. He saw an enormous king cobra which is believed to be the Manasa Devi encountered by the gun merchant too, when he visited the very shrine. Manasa Devi haunts him in his dreams. Like SWK has a cat myth, coming as a revenge for justice, it is the myth of Manasa Devi chasing a gun merchant for his ill doings in GI. The serpent goddess followed the gun merchant as a sea serpent (or dragon with glowing eyes) all the way to Venice; warned him; haunted him at various places and at last gave him freedom for a shrine built up in return. Deen is also haunted by nightmares in which he sees snakes. Deen finds this event of presence of giant being coming from water very similar to the current period experience of another past story from the grandfather of Cinta, that there was a suspicious beast with the glowing eyes in the water body of Fondamente Nove, which runs along the city's north-eastern edge. "two little shining discs, deep in the water; ... reflect the light back at him, like the eyes of a cat. The discs began to grow larger as he watched, as though they were rising towards the surface" (GI, p. 288). Deen explores the historical truth behind the myth and he encounters similar kind of venomous creatures like yellow-bellied snake, and particularly a poisonous spider, which gave him the answer to the riddle of a mystified symbol of circle with symmetrical lines (in the shape of a spider web) carved in the shrine of Manasa Devi. Like spider, there was a mention of ship worms, which are, in the view of Cinta, literally eating Venice, silent without being noticed. Along with Cinta and Deen encountering a species of a giant squid, again whose story is connected to the gun merchant that "the piece has been inspired by an old Venetian legend about a monster ... beneath the embarkment of the Punta della Dogana" (GI, p. 226) strongly weaves the supernatural storyline.

4.0 Powerful elements of nature: Serpentine Wind:

In both the novels natural elements such as water, wind etc are presented with almost all powers. In GI the backdrop of the story almost occurs in connection with water. Water as omnipotent force in reshaping the landscape of the swamp, raising the water level in the canals – the Grand canal and the Giudecca canal, proving people of their paralytic plight against nature. Like water, wind is also presented with its strongest form of storm and tornado, where Ghosh again mixes the presence of snake and magic with reality,

...a bursting eggshell, and a thin, ... , twisting like a whiplash as it grew...the twisting, serpentine form was spinning and dancing above a green cornfield. For a minute its mouth hung above the ground, almost touching down but only to pull back above the ground, at the last minute... three or four times until suddenly it bit into the ground (GI, p. 250).

A similar (to and also more powerful than the) portrayal of wind, is also found in SWK. At times the wind becomes omnipotent "I called for the dust and sand below to join me....to confront....

Yes, I'm here. I am all around you" (SWK, p. 292). It whines in Safua's ears when the invaders came to rule him, blows so strong that their hats flew away. She floats fast to Safua and made him smell of Gbessa's voice. Therefore, the wind both cautions and comforts the characters. The technique of narration was intentional that Moore reveals her mysterious narrator only at page number 60-61, in the "June Dey" episode, that a reader concludes Charlotte, the ghost mother of June Dey, who was martyr enough in saving another slave, is the narrator. "IT WAS IN THIS WAY – my gift – that I existed. In the wind, my spirit roamed the trees and hills, roamed the minds of my new world" (SWK, p. 61).

Similar kind of apparitional presence is bestowed in *GI*, through the character, Lucia, daughter of Cinta, who is a friend, a celebrity speaker and social activist from Venice. Cinta loses her daughter in an accident along with her husband. Just before Lucia's death, Cinta experiences a weird presence around her and she hears whispers of her daughter cautioning her, just as the Charlotte's ghost does in *SWK*. The apparition cautions Cinta who "... had woken up in the small hours with a nagging sense of unease." (*GI*, p. 39) and who was miles away then, about the accident at the same time which made Cinta think that her beloved ones who are undoubtedly miles away "...called the police more than an hour before the accident was reported ... known that something had gone wrong before the police did." Alerting Cinta as, "Mamma! Mamma! Ti voglio bene...I love you" (*GI*, p. 40) which made Cinta think that her beloved ones have arrived in her own hotel who are undoubtedly miles away. She "called the police more than an hour before the accident was reported. They would wonder how I could have known that something had gone wrong before the police did." (*GI*, p. 42) The spirit of Lucia also comforts, just like Charlotte's spirit does, saying that Cinta has a purpose of living without her beloved ones as she had some purpose to do. Later Cinta felt her presence in the ship named Luciana when Gisa heard a girl's voice calling her "Ella... don't be upset; they're alright, your children. Nothing has happened to them...", with that Cinta is sure and "can feel her presence" (*GI*, p. 259). Cinta was celebrating with Lucia and her wish "... one day you would give me a great gift, a boon..." is fulfilled. Ghosh utilises the diffusion of space and time as Deen realises from the last words of Cinta that,

"...she had an intuition that someday we would bring each other here, to this juncture in time and space – and that...repeating of those words from La Salute – unde Origo Inde Salus – 'From the beginning salvation comes.'" (*GI*, p. 286)

Lucia joins her mother after she had fulfilled her purpose. Likewise, Charlotte, the wind too has become one with the mother Nature. She wandered several years in rain and sun lonely into the forests made friends with the creatures, voiced the songs of bulbul. It was then that she happened to see the beautiful, red-haired, Gbessa, the cursed witch wandering in the forest. The Wind cried "I can see you, my darling. I am with you my friend." (SWK, p. 61). Moore always had her narration closer to nature that she had drawn the narrative technique to her support that she always kept her characters closer to the nature. The characters always resorted to mother nature, marking the commencement of the evening with the change of the song of the birds. when Gbessa was exiled after getting the accusation, as a fat cat witch, becomes the forest's child.

...creatures...left scraps of their raw meals at the entry to her cave, so learned to love them and trust them.....the animals of the forest did not care about her immortality. ...they cared for her as the sun did....feed her as she thought mother should feed their children, sheltered her as she expected fathers should protect their daughters. The sun peeked through the branches....as she hoped lovers greet their sweethearts" (SWK, p. 31)

Ghosh presents *Gun Island* as a documentary to pose the prevailing environmental crises, where nature and mankind would gradually fall in the hands of destruction. He presents Piya as the lover of nature. As a cetologist, she cares for the species of dolphins that die due to unseasonal beaching. She worries when the crew saw almost all the species of dolphin and whale, swimming against the current, hinting that the species are confused by the artificial signals that man create in the name of technology and about their acoustic trauma that the marine species suffer. The swamp dwellers worry of the silent reshaping of nature through cyclones and contracting swamps shrinking the landscape that makes them migrate to other nations as climate refugees. Moore portrays the Vai village people who were very much obliged to the nature, especially to the Moon and the Sun. There are instances in the novel that even the cruel Sun is kind towards Gbessa but the villagers want her to be dead. The Sun streamed onto her, touched her like her lover. The moon in particular, plays a very important role in the movement of the novel as the wind narrates. The moon is personified as "ol' Ma Famatta", an old woman, the first of Vai witches, who lived for 193 years foreseeing and whispering with the spirits and foretold the cursed predictions, eventually, have gone to the Moon itself mysteriously locking herself from the rest of the world, witnessing the sufferings of Gbessa.

5.0 Motherhood and Mother Nature:

As ecofeminism informs on the prominence of the oppression of women and dominion of nature standing for the ideals of ecofeminism, motherhood is seen as rhetorically powerful image that is appealed to encourage the protection and sustenance of the environment (Stearney, 2009). The mother ghost of Charlotte, posing herself as Kilimanjaro lives in wind and caressed every character with her tenderness, like a mother. And mother nature, who is considered to be silent yet tells strong stories which are not feasible to ordinary human being. Motherhood does not bound itself with the limitations like biological relationships. It is also connected with the concerns and care one gives to fellow species and to the nature. Nature like a mother nurses and nurtures human kind with its bounty but human beings fail to comprehend its splendour. Nature blesses Darlene, motherhood. Darlene, one of the acquaintances, who becomes the victim of the Emerson's brutal behaviour of having raped her and killing her child without her consent. The Nature, the Wind takes care of baby June Dey, she names him Moses. Darlene could sense the boon that nature has showered her, the breast milk, which made her so attached to June Dey until her last breath. "I'm nursing him and milk coming out. Milk coming out of me" (SWK, p. 74). Ghosh through his characters prove himself as a nature writer. *GI*, being a novel of Anthropocene, takes hold of the subject of climatic changes, which poses a great challenge to the environmentalists. Through Deen, Ghosh voices his scorn towards the younger generation which has least concern for the environmental well-being. Through Cinta and her conference presentations, he voices the environmental, political and economic complications of climatic changes and destructions caused by and against nature. Through Piya, he cares for the non-human beings that are subdued in the linear order of the ecosystem as a consequence of man's domination over the subjugated 'others', for which the technological developments stand as a cause.

Thus, the art of storytelling with the blend of nature with the supernatural episodes of magical realism make these novels, "an ambitious, genre-hopping, continent-spanning" (kirkus n.d) literary masterpieces. In the interview with Rhianna Walton, in volume 76 of *Indispensable*, about exploring three regional centres to the slave trade: the American South, the Maroon community of 19th century Jamaica, and the local tribes along the western coast of Africa, Moore elaborately talks about her *One Moore Book*, which creates children's books that reflect the readers' cultures; her strong characterisations of women and intentional character design of Gbessa as constantly be

in question with her gift; and also about the choice of wind as the narrator. Moore's answer is as follows:

...when charlotte becomes a part of the wind, she joins this voice of the ancestors. The narrator is an ancestor. That can be singular or plural. There are also parts where she is telling a single story, because even within the collective of anonymous individuals that make up the wind, she can speak to her individual relationship with June Dey...religious identity is obviously ..in conversation with one of those identities through an ancestor. (Moore W. , 2018)

6.0 Conclusion:

In conclusion, these literary texts are the examples of simplicity while employing magic in a feasible way. It is "the ordinariness...accepted and unquestioned position in tangible and material reality" (Bowers, 2007, p. 24) It may be considered that these two writers have not imitated but created magic with the raw material of life in reality. The most superfluous nature, which has essential experimentative characteristics unseen to the naked eye, supporting them to escalate the subject matter to a higher order. It is found that the themes like – exile, immigration, experiencing colonisation, enslavement, studying animals and their vulnerability, search for identity and true potentials of the individuals along with the transition into urbanized settings – as additional potential fabricators of magical realism as a mode of resistance across cultures and historical and geographical backgrounds.

Thus, magical realism not only has the ability to present the general Latin American resentment toward colonisation through theme of alienation, lack of descriptions and the uncommon misrepresentation of time, (SWK) and simply employ myth and legend to search deep into the geographical and historical spatial diffusion (GI), and deciding "what was 'natural' and what was 'supernatural'... (not believing) in 'supernatural' is a contradiction in terms – because it means that you also don't believe in the 'natural'. Neither can exist without the other." (GI, p. 35), it also examines literature in its interdisciplinary subject of Ecocriticism, Animal Studies and Anthropocene as branches of environmental humanism, which impersonate nature to be its prime focus.

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