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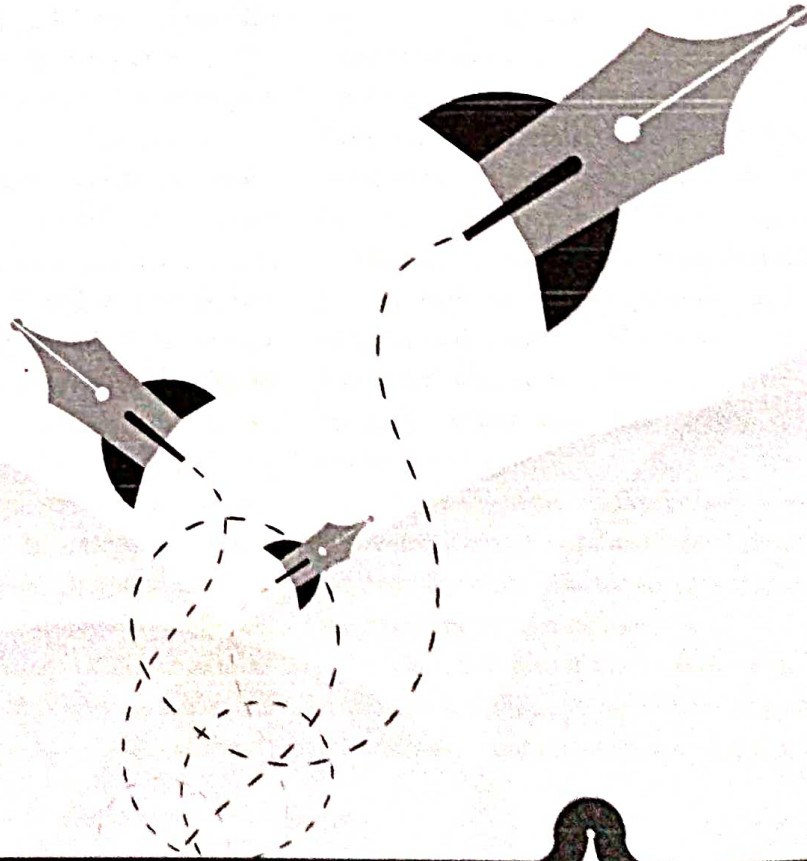
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PAULO COELHO'S TREATMENT OF MAGICAL REALISM IN "THE WITCH OF PORTOBELLO"

Dr. Shivraj N. Kombe*

ABSTRACT

'The Witch of Portobello' is an amazing novel by Paulo Coelho, a well-known Brazilian writer. The narrative is an inner journey almost into the hidden power of our life. In this novel Coelho focuses on the feminine face of God, through the protagonist, Athena. Spirituality has been revealed through dancing and calligraphy. Sherine Khalil, who prefers to be called as Athena, claims that she can transcend her soul in the Universe, where she is able to converse with the Eternity. Paulo Coelho successfully creates a world of magical realism, where we have to believe in the hidden power of our life. There is always a quest for the search of truth, the salvation and deliverance. The story is a beautiful fusion of earthly love and ethereal mystery. This paper is an attempt to chronicle Coelho's treatment of magical realism in the novel "The Witch of Portobello."

Keywords : Magical Realism, Calligraphy, Eternity, Hidden Power, Earthly Love, Ethereal Mystery etc.

Introduction :

After one of the most celebrated novel 'The Alchemist'; Paulo Coelho also tried his craft in "The Witch of Portobello" keeping the same track of magical realism throughout the story. The term 'magical realism' is the product of the second decade of the 20th century art-critics; especially the term has complex history among number of European critics and commentators. It was in 1925 that the German Art critic Franz Roh wrote an essay titled "Magic Realism: Post Expressionism", from where the term magic realism got its popularity. Actually, he referred this term in the context of painterly style known as 'New Objectivity'. He applauded this style by acknowledging the new painting's return to realism from Expressionism's abstract style. He categorized Magic Realism as the most recent art which enables an artist, "to reconcile that desire with a greater respect for reality with a closer knowledge of what exist, of the objects he transforms and exalts. This kind of man is neither the "empirical" Machiavellian politician nor the apolitical

man who listens only to the voice of an ethical ideal, but a man at once political and ethical, in whom both characteristics are equally prominent." In literature, the term was made popular by a Latin American novelist - Gabriel Garcia Marquez with the publication of 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' in 1967. Martin Gray in his "A Dictionary of Literary Terms" defines magical realism as "Fiction which mixes and disrupts ordinary, everyday realism with strange, 'impossible' and miraculous episodes and powers." The novel, "The Witch of Portobello" when read on these lines reveal the structure of magic realism which has become so inherent to Coelho's prose style.

Since the topic of the present investigation is theoretical, a close textual analysis of the selected novel has been done. The primary sources and the secondary sources have also been explored.

The narrative as in the tradition of magical realism is taken from multiple points of view. It is a combination of recollection and reflection by people who believed,

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they knew Athena. Athena is a mysterious young girl who was born in Transylvania and abandoned by her Romanian gypsy mother. She possesses the innate features of gypsies, which finally makes the difference. Gypsies have their own culture and way of life. They believe in magic, supernatural power and fate. Being a gypsy, Athena also possesses all these qualities. The mysterious aura around her persona is revealed through her actions and words. She believes, "Each of us contains something within us which is unknown, but which, when it surfaces, is capable of producing miracles."¹

She is adopted by wealthy Lebanese couple, living in United Kingdom, who have faith in Christianity. When Athena is a child, she always tells her mother that she has friends- angels, fairies and saints, whose images she believes that she has seen in Church. One day she tells her mother that she has seen a woman dressed in white like Virgin Mary. Here Coelho creates a world of mystery fused with reality. However "the political and ethical" man in him does not interfere in the background- religion. He does not in any way belittle Christianity. Enjoying her childhood as a normal child, along with her intuition to predict, Athena becomes a beautiful, sensuous young lady. When she goes to college she falls in love with young boy and eventually gets married. Afterwards Athena gives birth to a child, named Viorel. Now she devotes herself totally to her son. As a result her husband feels neglected. So he also starts neglecting Athena which results in conflicts and ultimately turns into breakdown in their relationships. She separates herself to pursue her inner quest to explore her hidden powers. She wants to know who she really is. She finds peace and self-revelation in dance. She found the possibilities of dance and music.

Athena tries to explore her world by turning her eyes inwards. Here Coelho has made a very subtle use of magic realism by making his protagonist to explore her 'self'; through dance and music. She believes, "Music only exists because the pauses exist, sentences only exist because the blank spaces exist."² She decides to fill emptiness in her life through dance and its possibilities. At the very early age Athena recognizes the gift of her magical powers. Therefore she devotes herself

completely to dance to transcend her soul to the Universe. She becomes able to fill spaces in her life through dance. She practices these skills with her colleagues in the bank, where she works, with her friend who is a journalist, with an actress and her group. While talking with Actress, Andrea McCain she talks about inherent strength and enlighten Vertex, she says, "Vertex is a culminating point of life, the goal of all those who, like everyone else, make mistakes, but who even in their darkest moments never lose sight of the light emanating from their heart. The vertex is hidden inside us, and we can reach it if we accept it and recognize it"³

Hereafter, she becomes the real estate agent where she comes in contact with Nabil Alaihi, a Bedouin who is a real estate agent. Here, Coelho makes Athena wake up to the hard world of reality. Thus she becomes a real estate agent. Bedouin knows Calligraphy and Athena also wants to learn it. She decides to explore the infinite possibilities by understanding the 'real' meaning of the words. Here Paulo Coelho once again gives a twist by making Athena chose calligraphy. So here we can simply understand that one can earn livelihood by selling houses and enlighten oneself by learning the skill of writing. This is how Coelho achieves perfect fusion of earthy and ethereal....magic and realism!

Thereafter Athena undergoes the experience of self- realization and hence decides to disclose spirituality to people. She arranges meetings to teach spirituality. Dance is used as a medium to become one with the universe. When she goes under such spells of dancing, she makes prediction which certain people find to be real. She tells people that she can converse with the Eternity. She teaches people something that she doesn't know. When she dances and transcends her soul to Universe, she calls herself as 'Hagia-Sophia'. She says, "I am a vessel in which the divine energy can make itself manifest."⁴ Now she believes that time doesn't make any difference to her because she lives in space.

In such a state of mind she reveals the truths and fortune of her follower and hence gains fame and name as a Witch of Portobello. Portobello is a road in London, where Sherine Khalil holds her worship meetings. She says, "We can see divine in each speck of dust, but that

doesn't stop us wiping it away with a wet sponge. The divine doesn't disappear; it's transformed into the clear surface." More and more people reach there to witness and watch her. She helps the people to unleash the energy within them. But the Church came into resistance with her ideas saying that it is witchcraft. Instead of any investigation she is murdered. Paulo Coelho doesn't disclose anything about Ahena's untimely end. It always remains an unanswered question for the readers. Finally the readers become totally convinced; with the views of a doctor, Deidre O'Neil, known as Edda, "She is a woman of twenty second century, living in twenty first."⁸ The mysterious world created by Paulo Coelho doesn't end with the end of the protagonist, rather, it continues in the heart of the reader. Paulo Coelho somewhere in the novel, provides us an answer of a universal question- Who we are? And at the same time makes us listen to the music of silence.

Thus, Coelho while portraying the mysterious and magical world of the "witch" does not lose his sight at the real world where sanctity of the religion is preserved by exercising the power with inhuman brutality. But to his great credit, Coelho remains to be an artist choosing only to say what his characters would say. He would not comment in his capacity as an author. It is as if he does not want to break the spell the Witch of Portobello has weaved throughout!

A good piece of literary Art pleases one and all, and for always. There are many new dimensions through which the works of Paulo Coelho can be analyzed and explored. In the present investigation the novel "The Witch of Portobello" has been analyzed on magical realism ground, but it can be explored from feministic perspective, post-colonial perspectives and many more new perspectives as well.

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