

LIES THAT TELL THE TRUTH: AN EXPLORATION OF TRANSGENDER IDENTITY IN THE REALM OF MAGICAL REALISM

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ABSTRACT

The fairy tales of mesmerizing mermaids and sleeping beauties with magical powers had always been a marvelous topic of discussion. The tales of men wedged up in women's bodies and women wedged up in men's bodies hardly surface in metafictional narratives. Kai Cheng Thom's debut work *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* draws our attention to the society's burning topic- gender identity and the consequences of being a transgender in a prejudiced society. The author brings out the varied facets of transgendered existence by universalizing trauma, relationship issues, bonds, and traverses beyond ordinary magical realistic fictions. The paper examines the effectiveness and profundity created when transgender creativity becomes a powerful device of magical realism as a tool to express the inner self of the protagonists in the text, using the premises of Queer Theory. The voice for the thousands of voiceless people and those neglected for decades is indeed a deprivation of the era and the need of the hour.

Key Words: Magical realism, Transgenderism, Gender Identity, Stereotyping, Trauma, Social restrictions.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, gender and its multiple dimensions had been finding a niche in the mainstream society. As gloom or glow, all social platforms, medias, and even religious gatherings are actively addressing the subject with in their own perspectives. Still society shuns the emerging gender minorities, their rainbow culture and customs. Although literature had been incorporating this subject matter to its realm, genuine ones are countable. Transgender literature written by non-trans people are failing to portray the inner conflicts of these innocent lives with all its ups and downs. Here comes the relevance of texts written by third gender people. *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*; *A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* opens a magical world of extraordinary beings, who found a world of themselves exhibiting real identity and thereby offering a world of security.

From the day Franz Roh introduced the term Magical Realism to till date, this unique technique had been in the favourite list of the writers who seek a meaning beyond the mundane topics. Literary giants like Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garzia Marquez, Haruki Murakami, Franz Kafka, Toni Morrison, Alejo

Carpentier had always found a novel dimension for their crafts with the touch of magical realism. In her

debut work which tells the unusual yet ordinary story of a trans girl, Kai Cheng Thom is also trying to bring out this master craft with the help of magical realism.

Objectives of the Study

- The study primarily analyses the depth of subject matter created when transgender experiences are intertwined with the threads of magical realism. It further explores,
- A general analysis of the life of a transgender in the contemporary world.
- An evaluation of the struggles and challenges the protagonist faces being transgender as expressed in the text through the aspects of LGBTQ theory.
- An analysis of the effectiveness and profundity created when magical realism is used as a strong technique to explore the inner stigmas of the characters.
- An exploration to the uncanny and mystical roads through which a transgender must walk through when he or she disregards the social constrictions of gender normativity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of entangling the fascinating world of magic with the mundane paved way for the emergence of the complex technique of magical realism. Franz Roh contributed a unique style of writing in the post-colonial era and his essay 'Magic Realism: Post Expressionism'

drew a strict frame work for magical realism; the writing that transcends beyond the texts. The Latin American revolutionary writer, Gabriel Garzia Marquez popularized the technique, weaving it along with the threads of Latin American history, thus creating the masterpieces like *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Expressionism is a modernist movement, initially in poetry and painting, originated in Germany at the beginning of 20th century, in which artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within a person. The artist accomplishes this aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism and fantasy and through the vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of formal elements (Lotha and Augusty 2019). Post-expressionism is also a German coined term by Franz Roh which is influenced by Expressionism, but defined them through rejecting its aesthetic. Roh first used the term in an essay in 1925, *Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism*, to contrast to Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub's "New Objectivity", which more narrowly characterized these developments within German art.

Even though Roh saw "post-expressionism" and "magic realism" as synonymous, later critics characterized distinctions between magic realism and Post-Expressionism. In fact, while referring to magical realism, it is essential to examine the relationship between realism and magical realism. In literature, the concept of realism was first propounded by Greek philosopher Aristotle through his concept of mimesis. Witnessing art is an essential way to learn about the universal truths of life. Realism developed mainly as a

literary trait of the novels in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The novels existed as they attempted to represent life realistically in order to engage the interest and sympathy of the readers. It was expected that the novel would show rather than tell the reader an objective interpretation of reality. This was classical realism. However, this traditional concept of realism experienced a setback when in the twentieth century many critical theorists such as Henry James emphasized the involvement of imagination in literature to paint a realistic picture of life. David Grant in this connection remarked, “Here realism is achieved not by imitation, but by creation; a creation which, working with the raw materials of life, absolves these by the intercession of the imagination from mere factuality and translates them to a higher order” (quoted in *Magical Realism; Historical and Conceptual Origin* 3). This form of realism makes the narrative of a novel intricate, because the realistic elements do not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents. This approach to literary realism is most crucial to the development of magical realism as a novelistic discourse. Despite its differences from the historical romance, the magical realist novel exemplifies the same cultural logic that structures and undergirds the historical romances of Walter Scott. However, the historical romance is not the sole source of magical realist fiction. It has many different generic progenitors and descendants like archaic literary and oral narrative traditions, pre modern socio-religious institutions, practices and beliefs etc. From the medieval king Arthur’s *Tales* to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* or Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Rappaccini’s Daughter* to Franz Kafka’s *The*

Metamorphosis, magical realism has been used for centuries. These narrative traditions are brought by the practitioners of this literary genre into contact with the European realistic novel. Zamora and Faris W.B. note, “The widespread appeal of magical realist fiction today responds not only to its innovative energy but also to its impulse to reestablish contact with traditions temporarily eclipsed by the mimetic constraints of nineteenth and twentieth-century realism” (*Magical Realism* 4-5).

Problem Definition

Can lies tell the truth? This question will startle everyone at least in the first glance. The truth is that there are some lies that tell the truth and it points to the magical realistic fictions. Franz Roh admired magical realism as an intuitive representation of the exterior world. He has viewed post-Expressionism as a marvel, miracle and magic of unending duration.

METHODOLOGY

Magical realism may be perceived as a break from rationalism and realism which transcends the ordinary. William Spindler’s *Magic realism* suggests that there are three kinds of magic realism, which however are by no means incompatible, “European “metaphysical” magic realism, with its sense of estrangement and the uncanny, exemplified by Kafka’s fiction; “ontological” magical realism, characterized by “matter-of-factness” in relating “inexplicable” events; and “anthropological” magical realism, where a Native world view is set side by side with the Western rational worldview (79-83). Thom’s debut work, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* is a mysterious, mesmerizing

piece of literature, which tells the story of a haunted young girl (who happens to be a Kung-fu expert and pathological liar) runs away from an oppressive city, where the sky is always grey, in search of love and sisterhood- and finds herself in a magical place known only as the Street of Miracles. There, she is quickly adopted into a vigilant gang of glamorous warrior femmes called Lipstick Lacerators, whose mission is to scour the Street of violent men and avenge murdered transwomen everywhere. But when disaster strikes, the protagonist is struggling to find the truth within her in order to protect her new family and heal her broken heart.

Textual Analysis

To talk about something beyond the prejudices of society, it is better to befriend something magical, especially, in a society where morality rules over humanism. Kai Cheng Thom in her memoir thus uses the technique of magical realism to tell the story of transgenders -the multi-fold marginalized community of people. Right from the submission of the book “For my family, blood and chosen, And for fierce femmes, fighters, haunted girls, and liars everywhere” (Cheng 7), Kai Cheng Thom proposes the purpose of writing this book. It is specially meant for haunted girls all over the world. She searches for stories about trans girls like her, but fails to find one. But she is able to find those stories which portray the soapy love, about a prince charming or princess who is so cute, fell in love. Instead of that kind of stories, she wants is,

The kind of story that does not wait for you to invite it to enter, but bursts through the doors of your rat-infested house like a glittering wind, hungry, hungry, to snatch up the carpet and scatter your papers and smash every single plate

in the kitchen. That surges, howling, up the battered stairs to blast the stained sheets off your filthy bed and sweep your secrets out of the closet and send them shrieking outside, overjoyed to be finally set free. Where are those kinds of stories about trans girls like you and me? (Cheng 9).

In this text Kai Cheng Thom narrates such a story which strikes the reader from top to bottom, which enters in to the depth of his or her soul as a spinning tornado, as she wants to make this text different from the traditional mode of storytelling. It is vividly clear from its structure itself, which breaks in to poems and letters in between mind-blowing narrations, which makes it more suitable and attractive as a magical realistic text. The distinguishing feature of magical realism is the fusion of something that is entirely different, but when they are fused sticks as close as lock and key, which cannot be parted, as Maggie Ann Bowers defines in her book *Magic(al) Realism*, “Its distinguishing feature from literary realism is that it fuses the two opposing aspects of the oxymoron (the magical and the realist) together to form one new perspective. Because it breaks down the distinction between the usually opposing terms of the magical and the realist, magical realism is often considered to be a disruptive narrative mode” (Ann 16). That means magical realism fuses two opposing perspectives and forms a new perspective. The protagonist in the memoir says:

It’s not wrong to hope, my mother always said. It is never wrong to hope. Hope made my parents fearful that I might get sick and die or be kidnapped at any moment. Hope made them wary of television or toys or friendship or anything else that might distract me from getting

good grades and going to university. Hope kept me trapped in the belly of the crooked house, in a tiny bedroom, surrounded by books instead of people (Cheng 16).

Hope is perceived as a positive current but it is the same hope that traps her inside the house being devoid from all social connections. Here 'hope' becomes the symbol of her suppressed emotions in her mind. And the two hopes commingle to the fact or to the creation of new perspective, that is she is a transgender, which is in fact, an oxymoron identity, a female residing in a male body. The protagonist's self-addressing as a girl and the claim that "Their greatest hopes rested on me, because I was a boy" (Cheng 16) will confuse the readers for a while. So, it becomes true that the protagonist in the memoir is one among those who stepped out from the boundaries that society assigned for gender. The problem arouses here. A person who neglects societal rules and regulations is always neglected and marginalized. "Picking locks is a glorious thing. To be able to open sealed doors is the greatest and most important kind of magic, because it allows you to interact with the world on your own terms" (Cheng 17), these lines emphasize the fact that she is already aware about her identity, but unable to reveal it because, she is locked in between the familial relationships. So, she is forced to run away from their home and friends, because she fears that her mother and father may not be able to accept the fact that she is a transgender. She says, "I have always felt uncomfortable as a boy, and you know Mom and Dad are never going to be into it" (Cheng 21).

The survival of a transgender girl is very difficult to withstand in our contemporary

society for they are teased and mocked by people who themselves introduce as cultured, civilized, and educated. In order to become detached from these circumstances, our protagonist escapes in to a place called The City of Smoke and Lights, although it is a highly dangerous plays where anything can happen. "In the City of Smoke and Light you can be everything you dreamed of" (Cheng 29) is the introduction the protagonist of the memoir gives to that place. Kai Cheng Thom uses the technique of magical realism tactically to describe the aspects that she has narrated from her own life experiences. In a chapter in the memoir titled 'The Lesson of Bees,' she says:

On a cold winter evening, my mother opened the door... A swarm of killer bees raced past her... Into the house they swirled, a boiling cloud of rage and desire, searching for the sweetest, softest thing they could find. I lay, six years old, in my bed in my tiny room... They landed on me, covered me with their vibrating bodies, crawled inside my lips and up my nostrils, into every orifice, and they drank up all the nectar they could hold. They lifted themselves up on their wings and flew off into the night. Except. Some of them stayed. Addicted to my sweet blood, they crawled up inside my body and built their nests there. They are still inside me. They will always be (Cheng 25-26).

If we make a re-reading of this incident, it will gradually reveal something beyond its literary meaning. Here, bees coming and attacking humans are normal that means it can happen. But some of them stays back inside the body and builds their nests there, is totally a meta-fictional narrative, which is a characteristic of magical realistic fictions. The attack of bees,

when we analyze from the angle of a memoir, it appears as an implication of any abuse that she had to face in her childhood days. And their building of nests may be an implication of the everlasting trauma that incident remained in her whole life. Because when we go through the memoir, there are many instances with a reference to the killer bees inside her body.

In the chapter titled 'Ghost Friend or The Only Person Who Can Make Me Come' the protagonist introduces a fantastical character whom she calls as 'Ghost Friend.' The ghost friend, who accompanies the protagonist is actually a reflection of herself, which comforts and supports in situations needed. But Kai Cheng introduces it as a separate character as if she wants her readers to understand how much important is a hand to hold on, a shoulder to cry on in adverse situations in our lives, a close friend to discuss with, which a transgender lack in most part of her life. The image of a ghost she used, reinforces the idea that it is a reflection of the protagonist's mind, because our minds cannot have a physical body, it is spiritual. It also underlines the quality of a magical realistic fiction, that is, "in the world of magical realism the supernatural realm blends with the natural, familiar world" (Zlotchew 15), as the entry of this character is in a tea shop near cemetery, which sounds realistic and mystic, both at the same time.

As the story itself is settled in a magical city and village, everything related to it have a magical touch. But there are some instances where magic step back and real emotions and feelings enter. For example, when the protagonist moves in to a house of her own, a little after she reached in to 'The City of Smoke and Lights', her friends there Kimaya and Rapunzelle pays

her a visit and gifts a beautiful small orange tree, which she likes a lot. It made her cry, despite her hard, not easy-going character. She says "Why are you being so nice to me, you and Kimaya?" I ask when I can finally talk again. "No one's this nice, not in real life" (Cheng 52). Here 'real life' has a reference to her life in her village called 'Gloom', where she is prohibited from making relationships with others. Even her mother and father do not pay much attention to her as their child; instead, they treated her as an object who will give them fortune in future. And no one recognized her real style of being there. But, in a magical place, two people who have no relationship with her before treats her as their own sister and it made her cry.

The sight of other femmes in the Street of Miracles, a strong urge to become a girl in all aspects started to pick her. And she seeks the help of a crocodile doctor, where the consultation fees cannot be paid in cash. His fee is that, every transgender girl who comes to him seeking help should go through an experiment that he selects. In short, they must exchange themselves for the medical help he provides. Here the Dr, Crocodile is a fictional character Kai Cheng created to reveal the sexual and mental harassing that a transgender girl must face in her real life. Gwen Benaway, who is of Anishinaabe and Metis descent and a transgender poet, says about this character in her review about the book, "The fairytale rendering of this interaction presents Dr. Crocodile as a literal crocodile, with the other patients in his office presented as various animals as well. As a trans woman reader, I take this scene to reflect the medical violence and exploitation which is visited on trans bodies as we negotiate health care" (Benaway 2016).

The 'vigilant girl gang' which the protagonist and the 'Goddess of war Valeria' creates to investigate the murder of Soraya-a femme among them- is the most attractive, the most magical, and strange thing that Kai Cheng creates in the book. They are notorious as 'Lipstick Lacerators' in the city. They haunt each cis-men who misbehave to a trans-femme in the street of miracles. But this gang activism goes beyond their control and in an encounter with the police; a cop accidentally gets killed by our protagonist. It happened near the valley where the statue of the First Femme is situated and she helps them to cover the dead body of the cop, using the creepers in her valley. The statue of a legendary woman helps them to cover-up their crime, which cannot be happened in real life for sure. This incident is a light-shower towards the real lives of trans girls who are always haunted and how much they crave for a hand to help them. But in real life there is no magical land in which everything can happen if we dream it, no First Femme to protect, no Goddess of war to lead, no God mother to comfort. There is only an individual to take care of herself.

The relaxation from the haunting night mares prompts the protagonist to bake a cake of forgiveness. For her the process of baking the cake seemed like creating a new world devoid from all aggressiveness that she had. She says,

Time and the solar system collapse to the size of a postage-stamp kitchen. The single fluorescent light bulb hanging from the ceiling is the furious burning sun. The cramped vinyl countertop is the vast expanse of space. Beneath my wet, sticky hands are the dust and liquid that come together to form the primordial ooze, the raw goop from which life is made. I am 'She,' the

wretched Goddess with sweat-soaked hair, stirring the universe with a wooden spoon. I crack an egg on the rim of a bowl: an atom splits and releases its blast. I whisk the ingredients and a planet is born (Cheng 166-177).

She portrays herself as a wretched Goddess who creates a new world to become a new person. She has to forgive herself for all the wrong deeds she did, or her situations forced her to do. In this part, Kai Cheng Thom is explicitly using magical realism as a fundamental technique to manifest the feelings of protagonist and this process of baking a cake of forgiveness helps her to get rid of the trauma that haunted for years. She says, "In the kitchen, I opened my eyes and cough once, twice, three times. A swarm of killer bees rushes out of my mouth and flies out the window. Sunlight pours through and warms my face. Distantly, I hear the phone ring. As though sleep-walking, I pick it up. The boy from the University library is calling, asking for me. The statue of the First Femme smiles" (Cheng 170).

The 'killer bees,' which stands as a symbol of trauma from the very beginning of the text, now escaped through her mouth, as soon as she tasted a piece of the 'cake of forgiveness.' She got devastated from the haunting memories of her past. And this incident reduced her hatred towards men and leads her to develop a relationship with a blue-eyed university boy called 'Josh,' who interviewed her earlier. The protagonist's relationship with Josh is also a representation of struggling everyday life of a transgender. She is in a tip-toe situation, because she cannot give up on ghost friend and on the other side, she wants to make a relationship with Josh. But she is uncertain. That shows she is afraid of the men approaching a

trans girl, which is a mere portrayal of a real-life trans-girl, who struggles to manage her relationship and the fear that she has in her mind. But she manages to make a good relationship with him finally, which provides her all earthly pleasures she craved for a long.

Scope of the Study

For an individual who breaks the 'so called' gender norms of the society, to continue their life with ease and peace will be a distant day dream. Being a transgender is regarded as committing a crime in our society which judges each people with their gender identity. Transgenderism is still a novel concept for our people and to make them aware about the diverse concepts of gender, magical realism can contribute in a great scale as it is half magical and half real. Magic always had a way through the minds of its spectators and to elaborate on the magical existence of our fellow beings this complex yet enchanting technique is inevitable.

CONCLUSION

In short, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* is an amazing magical realistic thriller fiction, which speaks for each transgender individual in the world. It gives a new outlook for this continuously marginalized community, who has no voice of their own. The fiction incorporates different themes through which a person must go through in his life; violence, danger, love, betrayal, hatred, struggling for a better life, encompassed with magical elements in a fantastic way. The memoir is a magical, fairy-tale type of story; on the other hand, it reflects a dangerous face of world that waiting a head of every transgender in real life.

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