

A Magical Realist Reading of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (Мастер и Маргарита)

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Abstract. The novel has three sections, but this study focuses on the third part which illuminates the magical experience of Margarita. While a critic examined novel as a bitter satire aimed at the Soviet regime. Another suggests that two heroes bear Russian national character. The pureness of the moral shape of Margarita, and the portrayal of Master as a skillful and most respected person in Russia. Others view the novel as a plea for man to overcome the evils which seem to control him and his world. While friction between Woland's group and Muscovites is seen as conflict of interest by another critic. But this study focuses on magical realism. The paper adopted textual analysis as method of data collection, while magical realism is used as the theoretical framework. Magical realism is set in a world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites; it challenges binary oppositions like life and death and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present. Magical elements and the mundane are interwoven seamlessly, making it impossible to determine where reality ends and the extraordinary begins. Metamorphosis of Margarita from a woman in a witch. Supernatural use of a broom and a hog as means of transportation. Carnavalesque scene on a monkey band stand and arrival of some guests in coffins occupied by corpses.

Keywords: Margical realism, Maragrita, metamorphosis, supernatural, carnivalesque

1. Introduction

Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov was born on 3rd May, 1891 in Kiev, the centre of early Russian culture, the author of *The Master and Margarita* (Мастер и Маргарита, 1928-40). Bulgakov did not begin formal schooling until he was ten years old,

enrolling in the first Kiev Gymnasium in the fall of 1901. At school, Bulgakov enthralled his classmates with tales that combined facts with fiction so seamlessly that one could not be distinguished from the other. As he did at home, he devised sketches and verbal hoaxes designed to mystify and confuse his listeners. Even in his earliest work, Bulgakov was fascinated with the concept of reality magically giving way unexpectedly to the implausible. Bulgakov began to take writing seriously when he was fifteen. Although enjoyment of the arts was a family tradition, Bulgakov, like many of his friends and family members, decided to become a doctor. In August 1909 he entered the medical school of the Saint Vladimir Imperial University, which had a demanding five year programme. Despite his early academic difficulties, Bulgakov graduated with honours on 6th April 1916 with speciality in Veneral diseases (Adams, 2005). The Tsar's army was in dire need of medical personnel at that time. Bulgakov served in the reserves during World War I and volunteered for the Red Cross at the front lines in Southwestern Ukraine. In September 1916, he was assigned to a small village of Nikolskoe in Smolensk province as a doctor for Zemstvo, a public welfare organisation established by the Russian nobility in the late nineteenth century. Bulgakov was disturbed by the prevalence of veneral diseases, especially its insidious effects on children. In Bulgakov's novels, his heroes are often fearful of the forces of violence and chaos, represented by mob rule, rampant ignorance. In February 1920, Bulgakov abandoned medicine to devote himself full-time to his writing. He died on March 1940 (Adams, 2005).

2. Literature review

In the view of Barkov, (1994) the novel turned out to be a bitter satire aimed at the Soviet repressive

regime. It depicts V. Lenin as devil Woland who brought disaster to Russia. The satirical characters of Master and Margarita do not depict Bulgakov and his third wife as it is traditionally believed. The Master represents the odious figure of M. Gorky, whom the Soviet regime officially endowed with the functions of supervising the whole literary process in the Soviet Russia. The image of Margarita reflects the odious figure of unofficial Gorky's wife Maria Andreyeva, a myrmidon of V. Lenin. It was on Lenin's demand that Maria Andreyeva involved gifted writer M. Gorky into the Bolshevik's activities. That very situation has been satirically described in the *Master and Margarita*.

Adeoti (2017) unveils the friction between Woland's group and Muscovites as conflict of interest, but this paper renders a magical interpretation to the plot. Most of the encounters between Woland and Muscovites have strange bases that are beyond human comprehension. These events correspond with Roh (1927) which suggest that magical realism offers us the miracle of *existence in its imperturbable duration*: the unending miracle of eternally mobile and vibrating molecules.

Bagby (1974) asserts that the novel is a wonderfully imaginative and inspired work of art that is not only on a social and political satire, but a plea for man to overcome the evils which seem to control him and his world. It further examines stylistic and character-oriented organizing principles as they instill life in the themes of love and suffering, mercy and reconciliation and good and evil.

According to Petelina (Петелина, 1999) in *The Master and Margarita* appears an opportunity to create symbolic figures. Woland represents some ideas of Bulgakov as well as his outstanding contemporaries who possessed authority. Woland often shows the knowledge of a human nature, possesses a skill to investigate and open and passions as spiritual, and everything, that is connected with a living human. Woland has come to the earth to execute and pardon, and he knows, whom to execute and for what, whom to pardon and for what. But the author allows us to guess, that Woland openly carries out his own concealed ideas and desires. Therefore Woland does not have the living characteristic, remaining in images of literary, as though a living symbol, allegory of author's conscience and wisdom.

In the novel two heroes express Bulgakov's positive idea. Naturally, the images of the Master and Margarita, Russian people are created with features

of national character. *The Master and Margarita* continues the gallery of the Russian people from the nineteenth century. To understand Bulgakov's heroes, it is necessary to place them alongside with Pushkin's Tatyana, with Turgenev's women, with Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's heroes in which life is overfilled with searches, doubts, features which give better traits peculiarities of Russian national character. The pureness of the moral shape of Margarita, her fidelity, unselfishness, courage at performing her duty are eternal traits of Russian women, capable to share together with beloved the burdens and deprivations which fall out as their share. The master in Russia for long is the uncommon skillful person in his work.

A master in any work is the most respected person in Russia, and not only in Russia. In the image of Master, it is easy to guess some of Bulgakov's portraits, and some episodes of his literary destiny. The love of the Master and Margarita is genuine, sincere and eternal. Bulgakov gives great significance to the images of Pontius Pilate and Yeshua. In the image of Pilate, Bulgakov shows the splitting of an individual and a statesman: he has such a bad assignment, that he could do nothing to defend Yeshua, although humanly, sympathises with him, does everything possible to rescue him. Pilate is a tragical hero. The author presents the conflict between the feeling of compassion and official responsibilities of Pilate, and this conflict is tragical. The feeling of compassion develops into torturous and restless suffering, covering the entire subsequent life of Pilate with hopelessness and a gloom. Pilate has broken the moral law by upholding civil law, as a result paid with eternal suffering.

3. Methodology and Theoretical framework

The paper adopted textual analysis as method of data collection, while magical realism is used as the theoretical framework. According to Stephen (2005) Franz Roh states that magical realism embodies the 'calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces' and, thereby, represents 'in an intuitive way, *the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world*'. In this way, magical realism 'offers us the miracle of *existence in its imperturbable duration*: the unending miracle of eternally mobile and vibrating molecules. Out of that flux, that constant appearance and disappearance of material, permanent objects somehow appear: in short, the marvel by which a variable commotion crystallizes into a clear set of constants.

Schwenz, (2014) opines that the term “magical realism” was first introduced by Franz Roh, a German art critic, who considered magical realism an art category. To him, it was a way of representing and responding to reality and pictorially depicting the enigmas of reality.

Magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy primarily because it is set in a normal, modern world with authentic descriptions of humans and society. It aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites; for instance, it challenges binary oppositions like life and death and the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present.

Sellman et al (2004) suggests that magical realist stories from around the world can vary greatly in tone, context and content, they share some common features. Magical elements and the mundane are interwoven seamlessly, making it impossible to determine where reality ends and the extraordinary begins. The story is set in an otherwise ordinary world, with familiar historical and/or cultural realities. Story events are not always explained by universal laws or familiar logic. Objects and settings within the story may take on lives of their own in a way that is ordinary to the characters in the story.

Constructs of time do not follow typical Western conventions. For instance, stories may be told in spiraling shapes rather than in straight lines. These attributes could be found in *The Master and Margarita*.

4. Findings

The novel has three sections, the first part relays the visit of Woland and his entourage to the city of Moscow, the second portion is a story on Pontius Pilate, while the third segment is on Master and Margarita. This study focuses on the third part which illuminates the magical experience of Margarita.

4.1 Metamorphosis

After the disappearance of Master, the life of Margarita completely changed. She demonstrated the strong will within her to attain happiness. Bamfo (2011) states that women play a crucial role in human progress and occupy an important position in the society. They have always actively participated in the development of a nation. In the early days of Islam, women worked as nurses in the battlefield, and in

some cases fought as soldiers. In this vein, the role of Margarita is significant in *The Master and Margarita*. She is a companion to her husband, lover to master and comforter to Professor Woland. The heroine in the novel, Margarita Nikolayevna is childless and has been married for thirty years. She found true love in Master, who suddenly disappeared. Unknown to her, Master has become a patient at the Psychiatric hospital. In a bid to find master and end her boring life, she accepted to become the mistress of Professor Woland, during Satan’s ball. In the process, she also becomes a witch. Margarita is portrayed as a strong willed woman who abandons her loveless marriage for another man that she truly loves.

While Margarita is sitting on a bench beneath the Kremlin wall, she is able to watch a burial procession, a stranger Azazello is able to read her thoughts. An act which baffles Margarita, and yet unknown to her as magic:

Я ничего не понимаю. Про листки еще можно узнать...проникнуть, подмоштреть...Но как вы могли узнать мои мысли? Скажите мне, кто вы такой (Дмитриенко, 1988:494)

Translation:

I do not understand anything. You somehow could have learned about the pages, spied on me...But how could you learn my thoughts?...Tell me, who are you? (Ginsburg, 1995:244)

Azazello invited her to meet a foreigner. Margarita accepted the invitation and a gift of a little round golden box, including an instruction given alongside:

Я приглашаю вас к иностранцу совершенно безопасному...Сегодня вечером, ровно в половину десятого, потрудитесь, раздевшись донаго, натереть этой мазью лицо и все тело...но не отходите от телефона. В десять я вам позвоню и все, что нужно скажу. Вас доставят куда нужно, и вам не причинят никакого беспокойства (Дмитриенко, 1988:496).

Translation:

I am inviting you to an entirely harmless foreigner... This evening, exactly at half-past nine, be so kind as to undress and rub this cream all over your face and body...but don’t go away from the telephone. At ten I shall call you and tell you everything you need to know. You will be brought wherever necessary, and you shall not suffer any inconveniences (Ginsburg, 1995:245-7)

Afterwards Azazello disappears. Margarita knows that something unusual is taking place in her life, when Azazello gave her a little round golden box, then she said: ‘Well, I understand perfectly that I am being bribed and drawn into some shady affair for

which I'll have to pay a heavy price (Ginsburg, 1995:247). The sudden disappearance of Azazello and the kind of instruction given to Margarita, confuse her further, but the scene conforms with Schwenz, (2014) who says Magical realism is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality.

The offers of Azazello begin to manifest. Margarita applies the cream in the golden box on her body, consequently, her ageing look transforms into a younger, beautiful woman. Azazello called her as promised, and gives direction of movement, also sent a means of transportation (broom):

Полетайте над городом...и затем на юг, вон из города, и прямо на реку. Вас ждут!...Что-то деревянно заковыляло и стало биться в дверь. Маргарита распахнула её, и половая щётка, щетиной вверх, танцуя, влетела в спальню. Концом своим она выбивала дробь на полу, лягалась и рвала в окно. Маргарита взвизгнула от восторга и вскочила на щётку верхом (Дмитриенко, 1988:501)

Translation:

Fly a bit over the city...then go south, out of town, directly toward the river. You are expected!...Something hobbled woodenly and began to bang on the door. Margarita flung the door open, and a broom flew dancing into the room, with the bristles up. It beat a tattoo on the floor, kicked and pulled toward the window. Margarita squealed with joy and jumped astride it. (Ginsburg, 1995:252).

4.2 Supernatural

A broom is meant for sweeping, but in this novel, it knocks on the door on arrival at Margarita's apartment and obeys signals and serves as a means of transportation. After boarding the broom, Margarita is excited. She bids everyone farewell. The broom later conveys her over the city of Moscow. She decided to leave a note for her husband before departing declaring::

Прости меня и как можно скорее забудь. Я тебя покидаю навек. Не ищи меня, это бесполезно. Я стала ведьмой от горя и бедствий, поразивших меня. (Дмитриенко, 1988:499)

Translation:

Forgive me and forget me as quickly as you can. Do not search for me...I have become a witch from all the trials and tribulations that befell me (Ginsburg, 1995:250).

Margarita extends her love also towards her maid, Natasha, with whom she maintains a very good

relationship, and gave her clothes and perfumes as parting gift, before leaving:

Берите все тряпки, берите духи и волоките к себе в сундук, прячьте. Но драгоценностей не берите, а то вас в краже обвинят (Дмитриенко, 1988:499)

Translation:

Take all my rags, take my perfumes and put them in your trunk, hide them. But don't take any jewelry, or they will say you stole it (Ginsburg, 1995:251).

After Margarita's departure, her maid (Natasha) as well, applied on herself the same cream Magarita used. Natasha transforms into a very pretty lady, thereafter their neighbour Nikolay Ivanovich is at the door. Nikolay is excited on seeing Natasha. He attempts to seduce her by offering money and promises Klavdia Petrovna (his wife) would never discover. Natasha playfully daubed him with the cream, and Nikolay transforms into a hug.

Лицо почтенного нижнего жильца свело в пятачок, а руки и ноги оказались с копытцами...Через несколько секунд он, оседланный, летел из Москвы (Дмитриенко, 1988:512).

Translation:

The face of the esteemed downstairs neighbor drew up into a pig's snout, and his hands and feet were tipped with hooves...A few seconds later he was flying, with a rider on his back, out of Moscow (Ginsburg, 1995:262).

Natasha is flying in the air by sitting on the hog and eventually catches up with Margarita who is also flying on a broom. Margarita stopped during her flight on the broom to swim in a river. After feeling satisfied, she whistled sharply and the broom responded to her call and conveys her to the opposite bank. She is accorded a royal welcome and is taken to the Ball in a car which dropped on the island, having as its driver a rook, black, long-beaked. The car flies high above the land. The car takes Margarita to Sadovaya Street, near the venue of the Ball. Their destination is apartment No 50. The content and size of the apartment baffles Margarita. An apartment cannot under normal circumstance accommodate these facilities. This development is also expressed in Margarita's thoughts:

Тут стали подниматься по каким-то широким ступеням, и Маргарите стало казаться, что конца им не будет. Её поражало, как в передней обыкновенной Московской квартиры может поместиться эта необыкновенная невидимая, но хорошо ощущаемая бесконечная лестница...Но самое поразительно- размеры этого помещения. Каким образом все это может втиснуться в Московскую квартиру? (Дмитриенко, 1988:518)

Translation:

They began to ascend a wide staircase, and it seemed to Margarita that the stairs would never end. She was astonished that a foyer of an ordinary Moscow apartment could contain this extraordinary, invisible, but quite palpable, endless staircase...But the most astonishing thing of all is the size of this place...How could all this be squeezed into a Moscow apartment? (Ginsburg, 1995:267-8)

Koroviev, an aide to Woland meets Margarita and introduced himself. She later put her thoughts across to Koroviev: What strikes me most is where you found space for all of this. She swept her hand to emphasize the immensity of the hall (Ginsburg, 1995:268). Koroviev explains the yearly ceremony Woland organizes:

Ежегодно мессир дает один бал. Он называется весенним балом полнолуния, или балом ста королей. Народу! Я надеюсь, вы сами в этом увидите (Дмитриенко, 1988:520)

Translation:

Every year Messire gives a ball. It is called the spring ball of the full moon, or the ball of a hundred kings. The mobs of people! But I hope you will see for yourself. (Ginsburg, 1995:269).

Koroviev seeks Margarita's consent to become the mistress of the ball: Well, he revealed that by "established tradition" the mistress name must be Margarita, she is considered the most suitable for that role, out of the other Margaritas in Moscow.

Так вот мессир холост, как вы, конечно, сами понимаете. Но нужна хозяйка. Хозяйка бала должна непременно носить имя Маргариты, она должна быть местной уроженкой. Сто двадцать одну Маргариту обнаружили мы в Москве...ни одна не подходит! И наконец, счастливая судьба... (Дмитриенко, 1988:520)

Translation:

Well, Messire is a bachelor, as you naturally understand yourself. But he needs a hostess. The mistress of the ball must bear the name Margarita, and she must be a native...We have found one hundred and twenty-one Margaritas in Moscow...not one is suitable! And finally, by a happy chance...(Ginsburg, 1995:269).

Woland's globe enables him to see the events taking place around the world is before him. He explains its usage to Margarita, who is privileged to have a closer look, and watches the action going on at a corner of the globe. Ordinarily, the use of the globe as how Woland has put it into, would not have been possible, but here it is possible.

Маргарита наклонилась к глобусу...увидела и ленточку реки, и какое-то селение возле неё. Домик, который был размером в горошину, разросся и стал как спичечная коробка. Внезапно

и беззвучно крыша этого дома взлетела навстречу вместе с клубом чёрного дыма, а стенки рухнули (Дмитриенко, 1988:520).

Translation:

Margarita bent over the globe...she saw a strip of river and a village beside it. A house, which at first had been the size of a pen grew and become as big as matchbox. Suddenly, its roof flew up into the air without a sound, together with a puff of black smoke, and the walls collapsed...(Ginsburg, 1995:274).

In preparation for the ball, she is bathed in blood by Natasha (her maid) and Hella (member of Woland's group). Before the commencement of the ball, Margarita has been informed that every guest present is important, nobody should be overlooked. She adheres to the instruction, and at an occasion said to the orchestra: Greeting to you, king of Waltz! (Ginsburg, 1995:278). At midnight guests started arriving through different strange mediums. Some arrived in coffins bearing corpse. The living arriving in company of the dead! Most of them are very famous in real world. The occasion enabled Margarita to meet very important dignitaries:

Вдруг что-то грохнуло внизу в громадном камине, и из него выскочила виселица с болтающимся на ней полурассыпавшимся прахом. Этот прах сорвался веревки, ударился об пол, и из него выскочил черноволосый красавец во фраке и в лакированных туфлях. Из камина выбежал полуистлевший небольшой гроб, крышка его отскочила, и из него вывалился другой прах. Второй прах сложился в вертящую женщину в чёрных туфельках и с чёрными перьями на голове (Дмитриенко, 1988:534).

Translation:

Suddenly something crashed below in the huge fire place, a gibbet jumped out of it, with a dangling corpse, one half of which had already crumbled away. The corpse broke from the rope and struck the floor, and an astonishingly, handsome black-haired man in tails and patent leather shoes leaped out of it. Next, a half-decayed small slid out of the fireplace, its lid fell off, and another corpse rolled out of it..The second corpse formed itself into a vicious woman in black slippers and black feathers on her head (Ginsburg, 1995:280).

According to Koroviev, the first guest is Monsieur Jacques, a confirmed forger and a traitor to his country arrived with his wife.

4.3 Carnavalesque

During the arrival of Margarita at the ball organized by Woland, she gets to a monkey jazz band stand. Different species of monkey peculiar to different global regions belong to this band and actively

participate in music production. Gorilla, orangutans, chimpanzees, baboons, gibbons, mandrills, marmosets. Animals are producing music, a craft that requires special training even among humans.

Горилла с трубой в руке, тяжело приплясывая, дирижировала. Орангутанги дули в блестящие трубы. Шимпанзе с гармониями. Два гамадрила играли на роялях, и буханьях саксофонов, скрипок и барабанов а лапах гиббонов, мандрилов (Дмитриенко, 1988:540-1).

Translation:

A huge gorilla with a trumpet in its hand, bobbing up and down clumsily. Orangutans were blowing into gleaming trumpets. Chimpanzees with accordions. Two baboons played pianos, while booming of saxophones, violins and drums are in the hands of gibbons, mandrills and marmosets (Ginsburg, 1995:285).

At the end of the ceremony, Woland commend and request Margarita to ask for anything that she desires as compensation for serving as his hostess. Margarita being a kind hearted woman, seek an end to the torment of Frieda with the handkerchief she used to gag her son to death. The power to pardon Frieda has been bestowed on Margarita, and she said: You are forgiven. They will not bring you the handkerchief any longer (Ginsburg, 1995:296). Thereafter Frieda vanishes. Woland asks Margarita what she wants for herself. She responds: I want my beloved, the Master, to be returned to me at once, this very second. (Ginsburg, 1995:297). Her request is granted instantly!

5. Conclusion

Though a lot of opinions have been generated on the novel, but this study is able to unveil aspects of magical realism such as the metamorphosis of Margarita from a woman to witch. Also supernatural events are on recorded over the use a broom and a hog, both serve as means of transportation. Carnavalesque scenes are found during the ball, such as the monkey jazz band, comprising of different species of monkeys, and the arrival of some guest in coffins occupied by corpses.

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