

# Magical Realism in Contemporary American Ethnic Writing

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**Mudrovčić, Tihana**

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Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku  
Filozofski fakultet

Diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i njemačkog jezika i književnosti -  
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Tihana Mudrovčić

**Magical Realism in Contemporary American Ethnic Writing**  
Diplomski rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Sanja Runtić

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## **Summary**

One of the important and characteristic elements in contemporary American ethnic novels is the style of magical realism. For each ethnic group, be it the Native Americans, African Americans or Asian Americans, oral tradition is very important. Storytelling, as one of the most important magical realist elements in these texts, is used as a way to preserve the tradition and rituals of one's predecessors. In such stories one does not see any boundaries between the real and the magical. The novels' aim is to convey a certain message, to teach the individuals how to behave and act in the present world, and still keep their ethnic identity alive. Native American authors Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko, as well as the Chinese American author Amy Tan and the African American author Toni Morrison, use magical realism in their novels to depict and emphasize the values of the community, preserving the oral stories and, therefore, tradition for the future.

**Keywords:** magical realism, contemporary American ethnic novel, identity, community, ethnicity

## Introduction

Magical realism as a modern literary genre has grown in popularity over the last century. It refers to a specific kind of writing in which the real and the magical are intertwined. In other words, in magical realist texts there is no distinction between the real and the imaginary events; both are presented and perceived as an everyday occurrence, something usual. Besides dreams and magic, magical realist texts also include elements such as ghosts, plurality of worlds, mythical beings, trickster figures, old myths and beliefs, folklore, and storytelling (Zamora and Faris 1-11). The term itself was coined by the German art historian Franz Roh in 1925, or according to some sources in 1923 (Roh 15). Yet, in literature it is a relatively new genre that has not yet been fully explored. Still, many authors choose to use it as a way of engaging the readers with the characters and making them more aware of certain ideas and stories.

This paper analyses the use and purpose of magical realism in contemporary American ethnic writing. To be more precise, it analyzes four novels of different American ethnic writers: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977).

Each of the authors represents her own ethnic group: Native American, Asian American and African American. What they all have in common is the struggle to assimilate into American society by maintaining their own ethnicity. Each of the three ethnic groups has had its own difficulties and traumatic experiences. Although they were the first nation on the American grounds, the Native Americans have suffered extensively for more than five hundred years under the merciless hand of the European settlers who took away their land. They tried to preserve their way of life and their land, but to no avail. The world they knew before, the world where a man was one with nature and lived with it in harmony was destroyed. Many Native Americans were destroyed, both literally -- by many diseases and alcohol brought by the Europeans -- and spiritually -- because they were forced to abandon their tribal customs and way of life. Gradually, many of them started to lose their identity. Some, however, found a way to at least keep some elements that connected them to their previous lifestyle. Through their oral tradition many Native tribes managed to keep their traditions alive.

The story of Asian Americans is somewhat different. They immigrated to the American grounds in search of a better and more prosperous life from the one they left in their homeland. They tried to run away from the harsh life conditions caused by stern regimes and wars in their countries. They were useful in America as cheap workers, and because of their discipline and

strong work ethics soon became a threat to other American citizens. The Asian Americans did not fully manage to adapt to the American society. The first generation of the immigrants, the foreign-born ones, stayed together and usually lived in the so called Chinatowns, which were excluded from the dominant society. They refused to adapt to society and the customs of the country they currently lived in. This caused a clash between the foreign-born and the American-born generations that has persisted till today as the newer generations have tended to separate themselves from their Chinese culture, becoming more “Americanized”.

The African Americans have undergone a lot of hardships on the American grounds. Firstly, they did not come to America on their own will. They were sold as slaves, free servants and manpower. The slave trade had kept on going for two hundred years before it was abolished. Yet, even after the slavery was abolished, the African Americans endured segregation, lynching and other atrocious measures taken against them. They were also seen as a potential threat to the “whiter” American population. The term “double-consciousness” is related to the African American culture. It was their way of adapting to the American culture, but still preserving their African heritage and history. Oral storytelling, especially the music and songs are an important part of that heritage. They have used it as a coping mechanism and a way of upholding their identity.

## 1. Magical Realism in General

“Reality is too subtle for realism to catch it...  
It cannot be transcribed directly. But by invention, by  
fabulation, we may open a way toward reality that will  
come as close to it as human ingenuity may come.”  
(Simpkins 153)

Magical realism is a term that was firstly used to characterize the return of the painting style from Expressionism's abstract style to Realism, that is, to the so-called Post-Expressionism. Since then the critics have been trying to provide a clear definition of the term, but their definitions usually differ in certain aspects. Roh used the term to praise the Post-Expressionist realistic figural representation, a critical move that contrasts with our contemporary use of the term to signal the contrary tendency, that is, a text's *departure* from realism rather than its reengagement in it (Zamora and Faris 15). Magical realism thus suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and of fantasy. A common explanation for magical realism would be that it is an oxymoron that combines natural and supernatural categories of reality (Walter).

According to some opinions, the difference between magical realism and fantasy can be seen in the representation of dreams. In magical realism, dreams are not distinguished from one's reality, but are seen as just another part of everyday life. In such texts the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter; it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence- admitted, accepted and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism (Zamora and Faris 3). Consequently, magical realism is a mode suited for exploring and transgressing boundaries, whether they be ontological, political, geographical or generic. Often, it facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. One could say that magical realism erases boundaries and “admits the plurality of the world” (Zamora and Faris 6). The world is not perceived as only “black and white” because there are things that are intertwined in such a way that one cannot really see the difference between the reality and imagination. Magical realism is “a corrosion within the engine of system” (Zamora and Faris 6), an admission of the exceptional that subverts the existing structures of power. Another term used to denote magical realism, “lo real maravilloso americano”, was coined by Alejo Carpentier. According to Carpentier, the word “marvelous” has lost its true meaning over time, and it creates a kind of confusion because of its definition used in dictionaries. The

definition explains that marvelous is something that causes admiration because it is extraordinary, excellent and formidable, which means that everything marvelous is automatically beautiful, lovely, and pleasant. However, the extraordinary is not necessarily lovely or pleasant. According to Carpentier, it is neither beautiful nor ugly; rather it is amazing because it is strange, and everything strange, amazing and everything that eludes established norms is marvelous (Carpentier 101). According to Jon Thiem, in the magical realist narrative process, which he calls the “textualization of the reader”, the assumed boundaries between the fictional world and the reader’s world are magically transgressed, i.e. the reader’s reality and the character’s fictionality are called into question by the process of “textualization”. This textualization usually occurs in one of two ways. The first one is that the reader, or sometimes an author, or even a nonreader, will be literally and therefore magically, transported into the world of a text. The second type takes place when a world of a text literally intrudes into the extra textual or the reader’s world (Thiem 235-236). Additionally, magical realism is presumed to be used on a historical basis; that is, the usage of magic in literature is to recuperate the real and to reconstruct histories that have been obstructed or erased by political or social injustice (Zamora and Faris 9). In such novels, there are narrators who self-consciously undermine the “facts” of history by means of variety of “magical” narrative strategies in order to provide the structural freedom necessary to perform their own dramatic histories. Magical realism is, therefore, “a well-meant device for expressing newly appearing realities that include the notion of not forgetting. The opinquity with magic, magical realism remains embedded in the specific locale and engaged with the very material, i.e. sociohistorical issues typical of that locale” (Polak 320).

When comparing realism and magical realism, there is an essential difference that involves the intentionality implicit in the conventions of the two modes. Realism functions ideologically and hegemonically, that is, it intends its version of the world as a singular version, an objective representation of natural and social realities. On the other hand, magical realism’s function can also be ideological, but less hegemonic because its program is not centralizing but eccentric. It creates space for interactions of diversity. In magical realist texts, magic is often given as a cultural corrective that requires readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality and motivation. These texts draw upon cultural systems that are no less “real” than those of traditional literary realism. Those are often non-Western cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation. Their primary narrative investment may be in myths, legends, rituals, that is, in collective practices that bind communities together (Zamora and Faris 3).



According to Roh, some further differences between realism and magical realism can be found in the fact that realism deals, or concentrates more on history, familiarization, empiricism and logic, naturalism and effect of the literary work, whereas magical realism focuses more on the importance and presence of legends and myths, the defamiliarization (seeing common things in an unfamiliar and strange way), magic and mysticism, meta-narration, romanticism and capability. Thus magic realism is thought to have turned daily life into an eerie form (Simpkins 141). Wendy B. Faris mentions eternal mythic truths and historical events as essential components of one's collective memory, which can include magic and folk wisdom (Faris 170). In Americas, magical realism has been linked to indigenous and black "Weltanschauungen", that is world views referring to myths and legends of cultures with a ritualistic-religious foundation. The important element of American magical realism is the representation of "self" not as an individual, but rather as someone with a collective identity. Determined by myths and legends and linked to communal values and traditions, the subject's consciousness develops through active participation in human, natural and cosmic realms. It is considered that the past is a vital part of the present, and the harmonious relation of human, natural and cosmic spheres is based on "dream connections," and constitutes a "spiritual linkage." The essence of this relation "is the power that enables magical things to happen," such as transformations of objects from one form to another, the movement of objects from one place to another by teleportation, the curing of the sick (and conversely creating sickness in people, animals, or plants), communication with animals, plants, and nonphysical beings ... the compelling of the will of another, and the stealing or storing of souls (qtd. in Walter). According to the Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias, next to the real reality and magical reality, there is a "third reality which is not only the product of the visible and tangible, not only hallucination and dream, but the result of a fusion of the two, that is, magical realism" (qtd. in Walter).

The usual elements of magical realism are the dualities of the world, metamorphosis, dissolution, hallucinating scenes and events, the co presence of oddities and trickster figures, the interaction of the bizarre with the entirely ordinary, different levels of reality, that is acceptance of a supernatural as a part of everyday events, storytelling, or presence of old or ancient systems of belief. In such texts there is no need for logical explanations, and there are no exaggerations because the aforementioned segments or parts are submerged into the narrator's tradition. In a way, magical realism could be seen as a reality that is already in and of itself magical or fantastic: "...the magical attempt is there: bypassing the commonplace unity found in most realistic texts, the magical text tries to go beyond...from the shortcomings associated with 'realistic' texts" (Simpkins 146). In magical realism the focus is on the problem of fictional

space. It involves the so-called Cartesian dualities: antinomies between the natural and the supernatural, the explicable and the inexplicable, and can be used to describe any literary text in which binary oppositions or antinomies can be discovered (Zamora and Faris 223). Jean Weissgerber makes a distinction between two types of magical realism. There is the so-called “scholarly” type, which is mainly used by European writers and is related mostly to art and illumination and construction of a speculative universe, whereas the “mythic” or “folkloric” type of magical realism is mainly found in Latin America (Faris 165). The mythic type refers to the places and communities “where ‘magic’ images are borrowed from the physical environment itself, instead of being projected from the characters’ psyches. It (...) is a suitable one for Second world countries from which indigenous cultures have largely vanished, even though they remain hauntingly present in the place itself” (Delbaere-Garant 253).

## 2. Magical Realism in Contemporary Native American Writing

Contemporary Native American writing primarily addresses the problematic questions of ethnicity and identity. Throughout history Native American tribes have suffered annihilation, dispossession and alienation in reservations. Their identity has been undermined by the systematic imposition of Western religions, language and culture. Their Native characters, whether in literature or any other form like history or art, have been widely stereotyped. Native American writers therefore aim to subvert those clichéd views of the Noble Savage and the vanishing Indian. Their novels are mainly populated by mixed-bloods who struggle to come to terms with both American and Indian ethnicity. They attempt to articulate their identity by rediscovering a sense of place and community (Noriega Sánchez 87). The crucial elements in Native American novels are the notions of storyteller and audience, which are the elements of magical realism as well, as it incorporates both oral and written traditions and various genres, and allows the insertion of the mythical into a contemporary reality.

Magic realism reflects in the language of narration the encounter of two cultures and two opposing perceptions of reality. In Native American tradition there are fluid boundaries between the realms of the material and spiritual, animals and human beings, and a constant slippage between the codes of the natural and supernatural. Writers include myths, folktales and legends from their respective tribal traditions to provide their text with cultural specificity. (Noriega Sánchez 88)

According to Elaine Jahner, “myths are an intimate part of ordinary daily activities, because they tell of the drama that gives meaning to the ordinary” (Noriega Sánchez 88).

Today, magical realist writers usually “pander to metropolitan tastes” in order to introduce the Native history and stories, their culture in general, to a wider, that is Western audience. That audience is not familiar with Native American cultural and historical background, and is, therefore, usually under the influence of stereotypes. One really needs to possess corresponding historical and cultural information in order to understand Native American stories. Thereby magical realism serves as a tool to “translate” Western concepts and the dominant worldview into Native American mode.

### 3. Magical Realism in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977)

“Silko’s novel is in itself a ceremony, made up of  
Multiple ceremonies, a ritual of healing effected not  
Only on its protagonist but also on the reader”  
(Noriega Sánchez 114)

Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony*, written in 1977, is an example of ceremonial literature accompanied by myths, tales, songs, dreams and prayers. Its purpose is to create harmony in the community. It is a story about a young man’s quest for identity. Silko depicted the main character Tayo’s through his development towards healing and approaching spiritual balance. At a first glance, one could analyze this novel as a so called Bildungsroman, a genre that follows one character's path in life as he or she grows both physically but more important spiritually, while searching for one’s place in the world, or better said the universe.

Tayo is a marginal character who cannot blend into society as he is expected to do. He is an outcast, both by his family and society. The first reason for that is his origin. He is a so called mixed blood, that is, his mother was a Laguna Pueblo Indian, while his father was Mexican. Because of this -- the shame that his mother had brought upon her family -- he is never actually considered as a true member of his family. While living with his aunt and uncle, he is constantly overshadowed by his cousin Rocky. The second reason that makes Tayo an outcast is his state after participating in World War II in Japan. He namely suffered from a post-traumatic stress syndrome and therefore had to be under constant care of his relatives. Once more, this novel is about Tayo’s recovery through his identity quest that helps him reconnect with the old Native beliefs and traditions. Silko therefore emphasizes the importance of shamans and storytelling that can influence the individual’s healing process.

According to Jarold Ramsey, Native American writers usually use the method of the “retroactive prophecy” in their novels (qtd. in Burlingame). Its purpose could be explained as a sort of a warning to the reader about the calamities that have or might occur due to carelessness or neglect of one’s land and surroundings. It is usually described in a mythological way that is close to reality. After the arrival of the Western civilization on the American grounds, the Natives and their land have suffered greatly. They were struck by many for them unknown diseases like smallpox, they lost their lands, culture and foremost their spirit and identity. The last was made by imposing on them Western customs such as Christianity and education in boarding schools, that forced them to get rid of their past and with it once more, their identity.

In *Ceremony* it is indicated that Natives' witchery has something to do with the bad fate – that is, the arrival of the Western civilization -- that fell upon the indigenous peoples of the Americas. As formerly mentioned, one of the elements of magical realism is storytelling. It is attributed with magical powers. Leslie Silko tells this story in an unusual way, by juxtaposing two different worlds, that is the world of the Laguna Pueblo oral tradition and the world of Laguna reservation after the Second World War. Thus her story is not, as in most modern Western stories, linear. It is circular, and it consists of many different stories that, by interrupting the story at some crucial points or overlapping with it, shape each other into a greater whole. That is how one finds out about the origin of the white people on Native American grounds.

Long time ago  
in the beginning  
there were no white people in this world  
there was nothing European.  
And this world might have gone on like that  
except for one thing:  
witchery. (Silko 132-133)

This story contains some other elements of magical realism such as shape-shifting (visible when certain animals transform into human beings), as well as the performing ceremonial rituals mainly to show off one's powers. The power of one witch is a story, a story that is so powerful that as the witch tells it, it becomes true. The witch predicted the cruel, senseless explorers and conquerors, their guns and many deaths they would bring, as well as the diseases, the theft and the exploitation of their land.

It's already turned loose.  
It's already coming.  
It can't be called back. (Silko 138)

This myth helps Tayo with his self-improvement and self-determination. Learning about it, he again starts to believe in Laguna Pueblo stories and legends, which were forced out of him by Western education in the boarding schools. With it he starts to return to his roots, and starts his healing process. According to Noriega Sánchez, Silko spins an elaborate web that brings together myths, legends, folk beliefs, chants, war stories, bar stories and conventions of the *Bildungsroman* genre, ultimately juxtaposing Western and Native American worlds- the image of the web has an important part in Laguna Pueblo stories. Everything in the universe has its ordered place and is related. (116)

Every thread in the web of the universe is and its destruction leads to an imbalance with immediate negative consequences. (116)

As already mentioned, Silko combines several stories and legends that are somehow intertwined. The novel opens with the story of the Thought Woman, also known as the Spider Woman in Keres theology, which emphasizes the importance of the women in Laguna society. Namely, the Thought Woman is the creator of the world, and four other worlds. She breathed life, or better yet said, thought living creatures and all that surrounds them into existence (Gunn Allen 13). Laguna oral history also includes a story about the Corn Woman, which is an analogy to Tayo's story in the novel. Tayo feels responsible for his acts in Japan during the war. He believes that by cursing the rain while saving his superordinate in the war he performed a certain ceremony that resulted in a six year long drought in his land. He wants to undo his act, and that is where the story of the Corn Woman begins. According to the mythical story, Corn Woman had a fight with her sister Reed Woman who did not work at all, and due to the fight the Reed Woman left this world, descended into the underworld and left the above world without rain (Silko 13). Later on in the novel Tayo manages to undo his first ceremony by performing another one. One morning he goes to a canyon. There he follows a narrow trail to a small pool, where he sprinkles the pollen of yellow flowers over the water. He performs this as he imagines the holy men do it. By doing that Tayo manages to bring the rain to the canyon. There he remembers many stories while coming across some important animals like the spider, frogs, dragonflies, flies and hummingbirds. These animals are all connected with the story of the Corn and Reed Woman. He also learns another story about a Gambler who stole the rain clouds. It was one of these animals – Grandmother Spider - who helped the people bring back the rain clouds and saved them from drought.

Back in time immemorial, things were different, the animals could talk to human beings and many magical things still happened.” (Silko 94)

“Everywhere he [Tayo] looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving; and if you knew where to look, you could see it, sometimes almost imperceptible, like the motion of the stars across the sky. (Silko 95)

An important issue in the novel is also the community. The actions of the individuals have a great influence on the whole community and its welfare. Due to the “sickness” that plagued the tribal members that participated in the war, the whole community suffers. The opinions of medicine men and other members are that the veterans should be cured, be freed from their sicknesses in order to restore the harmony of the community. For this reason Tayo

receives help from some medicine men, like Ku'oosh and Betonie. They try to lead him down the right path with the help of their knowledge.

Betonie is a marginal figure, just like Tayo. He is a mixed blood as well. As a medicine man he tries to live in peace and harmony with the land, which can easily be seen in the way he lives - outside of town, in a hogan that is built on a hill. He is a mediator between the primitive and the modern worlds, which could be compared to the magical and realistic worlds. When visiting his hogan, Tayo is surprised by the simplicity and primitiveness of his home, by all the different things that are cluttering it. One could explain this in a way that Betonie as a medicine man collects all those various objects in order not to forget important things and events in his life and the world around him. Memories are after all a very important thing in one's life and another element of magical realism present in the novel. Perhaps Betonie's objects, like dusty old calendars piled up in no particular order, do not have any importance when seen from the Western perspective. Yet, from the perspective of an old medicine man, who places a lot of emphasis on the events and history around him, these calendars represent valuable objects that contain stories. Everything has its own story alive in it, and so it is very important to preserve it. As for Tayo, he is the one whose only way to get healthy is to get rid of the old memories that haunt him. These are the memories of his deceased uncle's lost cattle, Japan and the hospital. They usually emerge when Tayo meets with his war buddies, who are still under the impression that they should be celebrated as war heroes because they fought for the white man's country. They are not aware of the fact that their time as soldiers has passed and that they should move on. One could say that his friends are the ones that lead Tayo towards the loss of his identity.

Betonie emphasizes the importance of change as well, even the change of the ceremonies, because the universe is always circulating and therefore causing the elements to shift. So he draws a magic pattern in the sand that should guide Tayo to his recovery. The pattern consists of four elements: the stars, spotted cattle, a mountain and a woman. That is actually the beginning of Tayo's vision quest; another magical realist element. Betonie performs a ceremony that includes Tayo. He guides him through this pattern on the ground, whose purpose is to ensure Tayo's success and his safe return home. Tayo's goal is to find and return his uncle's cattle. By following the pattern given to him by Betonie, he is drawing nearer to accomplishing his goal. He also receives help from a katsina Ts'eh or Spider Woman, another mediator between worlds, and from some animals like the mountain lion. The animal's tracks save Tayo from the guards who catch him trespassing on their landlord's grounds. Interestingly, as he is getting towards the end of his journey, Tayo is becoming more and more connected with the land. He shows respect for the land and its inhabitants, which can also be visible in the part where he addresses the

mountain lion with a song asking it to spare his life. Out of respect for the animal Tayo sprinkles pollen on its imprints. Accordingly, just like in the mythic stories, animals are helpers who contribute to the accomplishment of Tayo's quest. In that way the magical elements blend into the reality of the story. Tayo follows his dreams that eventually lead him to the cattle. In the end he manages to restore harmony to his surroundings, and he finally frees himself from the bad past. Monica Avila describes Tayo's quest and his healing process as "much more than a reconnection to his cultural roots. ... It is a sacrifice that allows healing to take place in Tayo's life and combat the witchery in his community" (Avila 1).



#### 4. Magical Realism in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988)

Louise Erdrich is a contemporary Native American writer of mixed French-Chippewa and German-American descent. Her novels reflect her dual cultural background. In her novel *Tracks* the focus is on the lives of the tribal members in a Chippewa reservation during a period of twelve years, from 1912 to 1924. It deals with issues such as loss of land, illness, starvation, emphasizing the role of memory on community and survival. The important elements, especially for this work, are the non-realistic beliefs from Chippewa folklore that are incorporated into a realistic frame. According to Maria Sanchez, the novel "reflects a collision of cultures of two opposing world views, the shamanic and the Catholic, the Western and the non-Western"(Erdrich 91).

An important element in *Tracks* is the element of duality, which is visible in the way the novel is written. The story is told from the perspectives of two different narrators, old Nanapush and Pauline. An additional indicator of duality is visible in chapter titles, which are written in both English and Native American language. That shows the difference between the Native world and the Western civilization:

The oral tradition, from which the contemporary poetry and fiction take their significance and authenticity, has, since contact with white people, been a major force in Indian resistance. It has kept the people conscious of their tribal identity, their spiritual traditions, and their connection to the land and her creatures. (Gunn Allen 92)

Like in *Ceremony*, in *Tracks* there is no particular plot. The plot is circulating, that is moving back and forth through space and time. The point of such a narrative arrangement is to make it seem more like oral storytelling. Like in oral storytelling, the narrator tries to involve the audience in the story. In addition, there are no boundaries between the world of the living and the world of the dead, animals and human beings, and in that way the coherence in the world is created. Another important thing is that the narrators in the novel, as well as the reader, have to believe in the existence of the traditional myths and legends. They have to believe in the plausibility of their real occurrence, in order to better understand the story.

Nanapush is the first narrator; he is telling the story to his granddaughter Lulu. Interestingly, while he is retelling the story, he makes no distinction between the real and the magical world. The story starts with his description of the death of his family and many other

members of the Anishinaabe<sup>1</sup> tribe that was caused by sickness, most likely brought on by the white people. He mentions both unreal and real causes of their troubles: “They say the unrest and curse of trouble that struck our people in the years that followed was the doing of dissatisfied spirits” (Erdrich 4). The issue of the proper funeral of the Pillager family is important in the story. Due to the sickness, the family, along with their house, is supposed to be burned, which differs from the traditional Native burial customs. Yet, the burning fails out of inexplicable reasons, which could be seen as an unreal event. In the tribe, the Pillager family is regarded as a magical one, which can explain the reason why the burning failed. Nanapush speaks then about dissatisfied ghosts of the dead roaming their lands. He describes that as something usual and as an everyday thing.

An important member of the Pillager family is Lulu’s mother Fleur. She is the only one who survived the illness. Fleur is a really interesting character. She could be seen as the central figure of the novel. However, she is never the narrator in the novel; one never gets to know about the events from her perspective or her thoughts. She functions as a “kind of powerful presence, a figure living between two realms, the natural and supernatural” (Noriega Sánchez 97). Fleur has supernatural powers. She is connected with nature, namely with water. She has a certain relationship with the lake monster Misshepesu. He wanted her for himself. When she was younger, she almost drowned in the lake, but every time someone saved her life. Because of that, the people who saved her had to take her place and died. According to Noriega Sánchez, Fleur’s “character embodies the main site for the magical, for ‘primitive’ superstition and belief in the supernatural, and functions as a metaphor for the vanishing Native American culture” (96). Fleur is also suspect of becoming pregnant by the lake monster Misshepesu. There are descriptions of her visit to the lake where she stays under the water longer than an average human would. Fleur’s character is described as animal-like, both in her appearance and her abilities. People also believe in her power to transform herself into a bear during the night:

We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard chuffing cough, the bear cough. (Erdrich 12)

People fear her. Whenever she appears somewhere, something happens. An interesting fact is her power to get back in a supernatural way to those who hurt her. An example of such power can be seen in the description of one particular occurrence while Fleur worked in a small town of

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<sup>1</sup> Anishinaabe and Chippewa both refer to the same people of the Great Lakes.

Argus together with Pauline. One finds out about that event from Pauline. After always beating the men in cards, they attacked her and raped her. Pauline was the only witness to that horrible act. The next day Fleur conjured a hurricane that destroyed the men's house. The men hid in the lockers and froze to death. Interestingly enough, no one except the ones who did her harm was hurt.

As already mentioned, the second narrator in this novel is Pauline. At some point the reader starts to question Pauline's reliability as a narrator: "She is a highly complex and ambiguous character who dangerously crosses many boundaries: between Indians and Christians, magic and reality, life and death, and eventually between sanity and insanity" (Noriega Sánchez 98). She is a marginal character, one that never really fits in her community. She is not reliable in any sense and is more interested in other people's lives than her own. Also, she tries to fit into Western civilization and free herself from her Native heritage. That is why she decides to become a nun. By converting to Christianity she leaves her traditional beliefs behind. Yet, gradually, Pauline starts to lose her sanity. After seeing a young girl dying, she feels some excitement, elevation and sees her future calling -- to help people cross over to the other world. Her encounter is described in a magical realist form:

If I took off my shoes I would rise into the air. If I took my hands away from my face I would smile. A cool blackness lifted me, out of the room and through the door. I leapt, spun, landed along the edge of a clearing. My body rippled. I tore leaves off a branch and stuffed them into my mouth to smother laughter. The wind shook in the trees. The sky hardened to light. And that is when, twirling dizzily, my wings raked the air, and I rose in three powerful beats and saw what lay beneath. (Erdrich 68)

After this euphoric flight, Pauline is found on a tree that has a smooth trunk, and it seems impossible for anyone to have climbed such a tree. This scene is described very realistically. However, it is described by Pauline, and that can also mean that the story might not be true after all.

Another unusual part is when Pauline decides to get revenge on Fleur and her husband Eli. She creates a magic potion and gives it to a young girl Sophie Morissey to make her seduce Eli. Thereby Pauline controls the whole situation; she is a sort of a puppet-master in this scene:

I turned my thoughts on the girl and entered her and made her do what she could never have dreamed of herself... I was pitiless. They were mechanical things, toys, dolls wound past their limits. I let them stop eventually, I don't even know how or when. The sun was lower and on the hill appeared the tiny shadows of

men. As if cut from puppet strings, Eli lunged to the bank and clutched his trousers to his stomach, worked his way through the reeds and staggered past me, so close I could have touched him. (Erdrich 83-4)

Pauline enters Sophie's mind, therefore experiencing everything she does. After that Eli and Sophie realize that they have been bewitched. That causes Sophie to enter a state of trance and kneel in front of Fleur's home, probably asking for forgiveness. She stays there for two days and two nights. Then something incredible happens. Sophie's brother places a statue of Virgin Mary next to her, and a miracle occurs. The statue starts crying and her tears fall on the ground in form of ice. After that Sophie regains consciousness. Pauline is maybe the only one who actually considers this a miracle. She collects the tears and puts them in her pocket as evidence, but the tears eventually melt, leaving her with nothing. Now, taking into consideration that this part of the story is again told by Pauline, one does not know whether to accept this as a credible real event or just Pauline's hallucination and exaggeration. After that event Pauline decides to leave all her present life behind, even her own child. She moves to a convent and decides to turn her focus to Jesus Christ and her becoming a devoted Christian. She is acting as a kind of a self-martyr. Also she starts to have visions of Christ, in which he forgives her all her sins. She convinces herself through these visions that she is actually not of Indian descent, but rather "wholly white" (Erdrich 137).

One vivid scene occurs when Fleur and Pauline make a trip to the Chippewa Heaven. Namely, Fleur bore her second child prematurely, and with this trip she tries to save it. This heaven is described pretty realistically. It shows the land before the white man's colonization. They see everything that was destroyed, including buffalos and beautiful grasslands, as well as many deceased tribe members. Pauline follows Fleur all the way. There, Fleur meets with the men from Argus she killed. She gambles again with them, but this time the lives of both of her children are at stake. Simultaneously, in the real world Fleur's daughter Lulu is lost; she went in the snow to get some help. Lulu loses her shoes and is freezing in the snow. The first time Fleur loses, which means that her newborn will not survive. The second time she manages to save Lulu and returns her shoes from the men. This scene again shows one feature of magical realism -- the interrelation, reciprocity and the lack of boundaries between real and magical world.

As Pauline's narration goes further, the magical realist frame is lost. Her stories, like the one where she is fighting Satan in form of the lake monster and killing it and later on, discovering that it was just an ordinary person, the father of her child, start to reflect her obvious hallucinations. Her narration loses on significance and credibility.

Another example of the fusion of the magical and real world is the story of old Nanapush who retells his and Eli's game hunt. Namely, in this scene one can notice the description of the shamanic rituals. Shamans are important figures in magical realist novels. They act as mediators between the worlds (Rosier Smith 82). Nanapush describes how he helped Eli in his hunt. The family was starving, it was winter, and because Nanapush was old he sent Eli to provide for them. Because of his inexperience, Eli needed help and guidance. With the help of his shamanic powers, Nanapush led Eli all the way:

In my fist I had a lump of charcoal, with which I blackened my face. I placed my otter bag upon my chest, my rattle near. I began to sing slowly, calling on my helpers, until the words came from my mouth but were not mine, until the rattle started, the song sang itself, and there, in the deep bright drifts, I saw the tracks of Eli's snowshoes clearly. (Erdrich 101)

Nanapush advises Eli how to hunt and carry the meat home. For Eli's safe return, he uses his drum. He pounds his drum and by doing so, recreates the rhythm of Eli's footsteps, to help him maintain strength for returning home: "Man and animal are one, hunter and prey fuse with the aid of spiritual guidance." (Erdrich 102)

Depicting the sad fate of Native American tribes, Louise Erdrich uses magical realist elements of storytelling to show how the Native tribes lost their battle for land against the Western civilization. However, she also depicts their strength and determinacy to preserve their customs and traditions with the help of one thing no one could take away from them -- storytelling.

## 5. Magical Realism in Contemporary Asian American Writing

We become aware of our ethnicity only when we are placed in juxtaposition with others, and when the priority of our other identities, such as individual, class, gender, and religious, give place to that of ethnicity. Like other kinds of identities, ethnic identity is not a fixed nature, or an autonomous, unified, self-generating quality. It is a self-awareness based on differentiation and contextualization. The self is not a given, but a creation; there is no transcendent self, ethnic or whatever else. Ethnic awareness is not a mysteriously inherited quality; it is a measurable facet of our existence, whose conditions and correlates are the only context in which we can understand how we reconstitute feelings and inner knowledge of our own ethnic being. (Xu 16)

The term Asian American was coined by the late historian Yuji Ichioka during the ethnic consciousness movements in the 1960s, and it includes the Chinese, Indians, Koreans, Japanese, Filipinos and the Vietnamese (Zhou 229). This paper deals with the Chinese Americans represented in Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989).

There were two waves of Chinese American immigration. The first one occurred during the 1840's, and it was mostly to Hawaii and the United States mainland. The immigrants came as contract workers on plantations, in the mining industry and as workers on the transcontinental railroads west of the Rocky Mountains. They came to the United States with a goal of working hard, earning enough "gold" and coming back to their homeland. However, "few had much luck in the Gold Mountain, as they called America; many found little gold but plenty of unjust treatment and exclusion" (Zhou 44). These belonged to the two old generations. In the 1870's there were many anti-Chinese sentiments and racist attacks:

Whites accused the Chinese of building "a filthy nest of iniquity and rotteness" in the midst of American society and driving away white labor by "stealthy" competition. They also stigmatized the Chinese as the "yellow peril", the "Chinese menace," and the "indispensable enemy." (Zhou 44)

In 1882 the United States Congress passed The Chinese Exclusion Act that forbade all the Asians from immigrating to the United States. This was valid until World War II, and the 1965's Immigrant and Nationality Act Amendment, when immigration from Asia was made legal again, which enabled a second wave of the Asian immigrants to arrive in the United States. The Chinese became and remained an immigrant-dominant community, even though they comprised

of 63 percent of the first “foreign-born” generation and 27 percent of the second, U.S-born generation of foreign-born parents (Zhou 44). They mostly inhabited the West, and were also concentrated around New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco. The Chinese Americans usually lived in Chinatowns -- separate from the rest of the American society. Those were close-knit communities mostly consisting of extended families, that is, close friends who were not related but assumed such roles. The Chinese Americans still encounter a lot of stereotypes in the dominant society, where people assume they are foreigners just on the base of their appearance (Zhou 53).

Contemporary Chinese American writing frequently employs the theme of conflict such as the conflict between two generations. Whereas the first generation tries to stay separate from the American culture as much as possible, by nurturing its culture, values, and language, the second generation considers this a bit unnecessary and they try to assimilate into American society. It is said that “becoming American while maintaining Chinese ethnicity is not just a possibility but an increasingly preferred choice among Chinese Americans” (Zhou 52). However, elements of magical realism in contemporary Chinese American texts testify to the ongoing process of preserving one’s ethnicity. Storytelling is the most frequent concept in these texts because it is, and has always been said, the easiest way to teach someone about different ideas and to pass on the valued knowledge to other members of the community and the reader as well. Mythical identity quests also play an important role in such novels -- the characters try to define themselves and to assimilate into American society, but also to preserve their ethnic background and identity. Chinese legends, beliefs, customs and myths are also an essential part and are used to strengthen individuals’ ties to the community and raise their awareness of their historical background.

## 6. Magical Realism in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)

Amy Tan is a contemporary Asian American writer. She belongs to the so-called second generation of Chinese immigrants -- the children of first generation Chinese American parents, who moved to the United States during the Communist regimes in their homeland, in order to find a better and more prosperous life. In her novel *The Joy Luck Club* Tan uses her own family's story and her relationship with her mother as an inspiration. After her father's death she found out that her mother had led another life back in China before she moved to the United States in the 1950's. She had three daughters and an abusive husband, whom she divorced before leaving China. After some years Tan visited her mother's hometown and reunited her mother with her long-lost daughters. The way Tan's mother disagreed with her daughter's life decisions regarding her education and love life is one more autobiographical aspect that she later on covered in her novel *The Joy Luck Club*. Yet, the most important aspects represented in the novel are the different viewpoints of the seven narrators on life in the United States, and their attempt to preserve the Chinese tradition, community and culture while trying to adapt to the new and different world. The novel clearly shows the difference between the first and second generation of Chinese Americans, dealing with the characters' identity, its loss and eventual rediscovery through memory and oral tradition.

The novel is divided into four parts, each of which contains four different stories told either by the mothers or their daughters. This makes up sixteen stories that are all conjoined to a certain unity which leads to one character's growth and completion of self. In Chinese numerology number four is considered to be unlucky because its pronunciation sounds similar to the pronunciation of the Chinese word for "death". However, in the novel it is a symbol of unity and completion.

There are four parables in the novel, each being an introduction to a new section of four stories told either by the mothers or by the daughters. They foretell what the narrators' stories will be about. The first one -- "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" -- tells a story of an old Chinese woman who owned a beautiful swan, which was first a duck. In order to become more beautiful, the duck stretched out her neck and turned into a graceful creature. The woman decided to sail to America with her swan in hope of having a better life there. She planned on having a daughter there just like her, who would be free of all the unpleasant Chinese customs and who would be a perfect American, just like her swan- more than what she had hoped for. However, upon the arrival in the new land, the bird was taken away from her; she forgot



everything she planned and what she came there for. Eventually, her daughter became a perfect stranger to her, an American girl without any connection to her mother's heritage and Chinese identity. They were never able to understand each other. This parable is followed by the story of June Woo, who after her mother's death assumes her place in The Joy Luck Club, her mah jong club as the fourth member, in order to continue the tradition. She also receives a task of telling her mother's stories, to keep the memory of her alive. The other three stories are of the three mothers who talk of their childhood and the events and people who had an influence on their life later on.

The second parable, "The Twenty Six Malignant Gates" is about a Chinese book on bad things that can happen to a child outside its house -- a book of moral stories about consequences of children's misbehavior. In the parable, a Chinese mother warns her daughter not to ride her bicycle around the corner because according to the book, if she does not see the girl, the girl will fall and hurt herself. The daughter does not believe her mother or the book because it is written in Chinese, and she questions her mother's credulity. She misbehaves and goes on with her bicycle only to fall off it not even reaching the corner. This section is followed by the daughters' stories of their childhood and their yearning for independence, which only causes conflicts with their mothers.

The third parable, "American Translation", tells a story about superstitions: a mother visits her daughter in her new apartment and notices immediately a sign of bad luck. It is a mirror at the foot of her bed- a very bad omen. In order to fix that, the mother puts another mirror opposite the first one, which cancels the bad luck and creates good fortune- the so-called peach-blossom. The daughter sees her own reflection in the mirrors, which means that she will soon have a baby. This section is mostly on the Chinese superstitious beliefs related to the five elements and their balance within a person, mind and thought power, and the choice of food at the family dinners, which shows how one acts in the society.

The last parable is called "Queen Mother of the Western Skies". It shows the old woman again, only now with her baby granddaughter. The woman tries to decide whether to teach her granddaughter some valuable life lessons to protect her innocence from the evil in the world or not. Later she recognizes the Queen Mother of the Western Skies in the child and realizes that she should teach her how to protect herself by losing her innocence but also warn her not to lose her hope. This shows how the power of storytelling is transmitted not only from the mothers to their daughters, but in the other direction as well. They all learn from each other in order to maintain their identity which is in fact both Chinese and American.

The title of the novel refers to a club founded by one of the mothers, Suyuan Woo back in her homeland during the war against the Japanese. She decided to found a club where four women would meet once a week and play mah jong. This was a way for them to forget about all the horrors of war and the absence of their husbands:

So we decided to hold parties and pretend each week had become the new year. Each week we could forget past wrongs done to us. We weren't allowed to think a bad thought. We feasted, we laughed, we played games, lost and won, we told the best stories. And each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that's how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck. (Tan 25)

After arriving in America, San Francisco, Suyuan continued with her club. She met three new women who shared a similar fate with her and they became a "family" of some sort. The number of players in mah jong is related to the cardinal directions of East, West, North and South. In that way a circle is formed that symbolizes their unity. Each of the mothers had her place at the table, and Suyuan sat on the Eastern side, "where things begin (Tan 41)", since she was the founder of the club. After her death, June takes over her place to maintain the balance. Thus, the circle remains unbroken. By being placed to that position, June's life starts anew, that is she begins her own quest for her 'Chinese self'.

Jing-mei Woo, also called "June", is a character who tells both her own and her mother Suyuan's story. One could interpret her role as that of the main character because her life story and her identity quest triggers off the other character's stories and their own identity quests. After her mother's death, June finds out that her twin daughters that she left in China during the Japanese invasion have been found and would like to reunite with their mother. However, they do not know that Suyuan passed away, so June receives a task of going to China and telling them the bad news. Only after finding this out, June realizes that she does not know a thing about her mother and her life before coming to the United States: "What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything. She was my mother" (Tan 40). With June's story, that is memories of her childhood, youth and memories connected to her mother become visible and set off the other mother's stories. The other mothers, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-Ying St.Clair, who were Suyuan's friends and members of the Joy Luck Club, realize only then that their own daughters could also turn out like June -- ignorant of their own past and separated from their Chinese heritage and culture:

And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see the daughters who grow impatient when their

mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation. (Tan 41)

One of the magical realist elements found in the novel is the element of storytelling. In fact, it is the most significant element. As already mentioned, there are seven narrators, each telling a different story of their life. The three mothers, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-Ying St.Clair retell their childhood and youth memories from China and later on the memories of important events in their life as American citizens. Through the first section of stories, about their life in China, the reader gets an insight into the mothers' personalities as well as some of the Chinese customs and traditions, like for example the arranging of marriage through a matchmaker at a very early age, wedding traditions or superstitions, the importance of the Chinese zodiac signs and the five elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water) when it comes to determining someone's character, firm beliefs in and respect for one's ancestors and ghosts and belief in some mythical beings and creatures (Moon Lady, Old Mr. Chou, Coiling Dragon). The second part of their storytelling refers to their attempt to connect with their daughters in order to show them how to free or better yet find themselves and their true identity, and also preserve the families' ethnic identity. "Within the microcultural structure of family, the only means available for mothers to ensure ethnic continuity is to recollect the past and to tell tales of what is remembered" (Xu 3).

The daughters' stories however, are more concentrated on the generational and cultural clash with their mothers. They belong to the second generation of Asian Americans, which means they were born in America. According to Ben Xu, the daughters, Jing-mei "June" Woo, Waverly Jong, Rose Hsu and Lena St.Clair are "Chinese-Americans whose Chineseness is more meaningful in their relationship to white Americans than in their relationship to the Chinese culture they know little about" (Xu 15). They do not really appreciate their heritage as much as their mothers would like them to, and their concern is to be accepted in American society as equals, not as members of an ethnic group. Even though they are born American, their physical appearance still distinguishes them from others and is the only thing that makes them Chinese most of their lives, until their mothers decide to change that. Each daughter at least once confronted her mother during her life. For example, Lindo Jong and Suyuan Woo have always competed against each other in showing off their daughters' success. Waverly Jong was a child prodigy at chess, whereas June was forced to take piano lessons in order to become the next genius. At some point, both June and Waverly stood up to and defied their mothers because they

could not stand the pressure that was put upon them. When it comes to Rose and Lena, their main conflict with their mothers is in that they are all alike. Lena and her mother Ying Ying do not communicate at all. They are both submissive characters; they do not speak up for themselves and aim to please others rather than themselves. This is something Ying Ying notices only after seeing her daughter's disastrous marriage in which she tries to act as her husband's equal when it is not entirely possible. An-mei and Rose's relationship is similar. They have both learned to swallow their opinions and suppress their emotions toward others. An-mei also realizes that only after Rose's marriage falls apart, and she tries desperately to help her once stand up for herself and fight for her rights:

She cried, "No choice! No choice!" she doesn't know. If she doesn't speak, she is making a choice. If she doesn't try, she can lose her chance forever.

I know this, because I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness. (Tan 215)

The use and description of various customs and beliefs frequently occurs both in ethnic literature and magical realism. For example, Tan mentions the five elements when describing the characters' personalities and their fates. The elements are Earth, Wood, Fire, Water, and Metal. It is important for a person to maintain a balance between those elements: "Too much fire and you had a bad temper. (...) Too much wood and you bent too quickly to listen to other people's ideas, unable to stand on your own. (...) Too much water and you flowed in too many directions..." (Tan 31). In Lindo Jong's childhood story, "The Red Candle", there is an example of how one's lack of a certain element can be interpreted as a cause of marital problems such as a failure in conceiving a child. Lindo was in an arranged marriage with a young boy, whose mother eagerly expected a grandchild. The boy was immature and afraid of Lindo and refused to have any sexual relations with her; yet he claimed to his mother otherwise, causing her to become very impatient and to consult the matchmaker about the problem. The matchmaker explained that her

"...daughter-in-law was born with enough wood, fire, water, and earth, and she was deficient in metal, which was a good sign. But when she was married, [the mother-in-law] loaded her down with gold bracelets and decorations and now she has all the elements, including metal. She's too balanced to have babies." (Tan 63)

As a result, the matchmaker decides to free Lindo's Mind by stripping her of all that metal and making her more cunning and self-minded: "They say this is what happens if you lack metal. You begin to think as an independent person. That day I started to think about how I would escape this marriage without breaking my promise to my family" (Tan 63).

According to Chinese tradition, the horoscope and one's birth year is also of huge importance for one's character. For example, in the novel *Waverly Jong* compares herself to her mother, based on their signs:

“A Horse, born in 1918, destined to be obstinate and frank to the point of tactlessness. She and I make a bad combination, because I'm a Rabbit, born in 1951, supposedly sensitive, with tendencies toward being thin-skinned and skitter at the first sign of criticism.” (Tan 167)

Their incompatible horoscopes thus serve as an indicator of their usual disagreements and conflicts in the novel. This shows why Waverly was always afraid of her mother's opinion and expected severe reactions. Even from her earlier childhood years when she was a child prodigy at playing chess, to later on when she divorced her husband and decided to marry a white man who was not really acquainted with their Chinese ways, she would always be in some kind of conflict with her critical and disagreeing mother. Similarly, Ying Ying St.Clair describes herself and her daughter Lena's personalities and their fate that is predetermined by the year of their birth. They are both Tigers, supposed to be strong and cunning, yet that side of them emerges only later, when they manage to release their inner strength and voice. Ying Ying realizes that only when she sees her daughter going in the same way as she did -- being submissive, settling for less and not voicing out her desires and thoughts in a marriage, does she decide to change that, to bring her on the right path by telling Lena her own story.

“I was born in the year of the Tiger. It was a very bad year to be born, a very good year to be a Tiger. That was the year a very bad spirit entered the world. People in the countryside died like chickens on a hot summer day. People in the city became shadows, went into their homes and disappeared. Babies were born and did not get fatter. The flesh fell off their bones and they died.

The bad spirit stayed in the world for four years. But I came from a spirit even stronger, and I lived. This is what my mother told me when I was old enough to know why I was so heartstrong in my ways.

Then she told me why a tiger is gold and black. It has two ways. The gold side leaps with its fierce heart. The black side stands still with cunning, hiding its gold between trees, seeing and not being seen, waiting patiently for things to come. I did not learn to use my black side until after the bad man left me.” (Tan 248)

Ghosts are a common part of Chinese culture. In An-mei's story, her mother was considered to be a ghost because she left her and her little brother when she remarried. The term

“ghost” did not always refer to someone deceased. It referred to “anyone [they] were forbidden to talk about” (Tan 42). An-mei also mentions some old superstitions her grandmother used to believe in, about the ghosts who took strong-willed and disobedient children away from their families. In order to send them away and stop them from stealing An-mei and her brother, she said aloud that they “had fallen out of the bowels of a stupid goose, two eggs that nobody wanted, not even good enough to crack over rice porridge” (Tan 42). Later on in her story, An-mei mentions how her mother saved her and her younger brother from a poor life and ensured them with respect and prosperity by killing herself two days before the lunar New Year: “she would rather kill her own weak spirit so she could give me a stronger one” (Tan 240). The reason she killed herself on that particular day, was because in Chinese belief the soul comes back three days after one’s death to settle any scores, and that meant her soul would come on the first day of the new year, when “all debts must be paid, or disaster and misfortune will follow” (Tan 240). An-mei’s mother had been a concubine of a wealthy man. She gave birth to a son, who was taken away from her by the man’s first wife and raised as her own, while An-mei’s mother was only the third wife and was regarded as worthless. After her death, the man promised to her spirit to protect An-mei and her brother and enable them a lush life.

Lindo Jong’s story also shows what a great influence and power the ghosts can have on people. On the day of her marriage she blew out the red candle lit on both ends, which symbolizes the happiness in a marriage if it burns out completely. She did not mention that until later on, after her mother-in-law started to torture her for not being able to give her a grandchild. She made up a dream in which the family’s ancestors appeared to her and spoke of their marriage being doomed because the candle was blown out due to the carelessness of a servant. To persuade the mother-in-law of the authenticity of the dream, she made up three signs that will show her that the marriage was on the way of its destruction. The first one was her husband’s birthmark on his back, which she said was a spot drawn on his back by the ancestors and which will slowly eat away his flesh. The second sign was her missing tooth, which she said was removed by the ancestors. The third sign was a pregnant servant girl, who she knew was having secret sexual relations with a delivery man. In order not to offend the ancestors and bring dishonor and doom to the family, the mother-in-law lets Lindo go free.

Some mythical and magical creatures are also mentioned, like the Moon Lady, Coiling Dragon, Old Mr. Chou or the turtle and the magpies. Ying Ying’s childhood memory describes an annual festival in honour of the Moon Lady, a woman who was doomed because of her greed for everlasting life. The Coiling Dragon, on the other hand, is a mythical creature that abides in the water. It is mentioned in Rose’s story about the accident in which her youngest brother

drowned in the sea. Her mother, An-mei refused to believe that the boy was lost forever and she went back to the sea with Rose in order to find him. She remembered a story of a boy in China who lost his hand in a firecracker accident, whose mother managed to pay an ancestral debt to a three-eyed god of fire by performing a certain ritual in order to grow back his hand:

“An ancestor of ours once stole water from a sacred well. Now the water is trying to steal back. We must sweeten the temper of the Coiling Dragon who lives in the sea. And then we must make him loosen his coils from Bing by giving him another treasure he can hide.” (Tan 129)

An-mei performed the ritual by pouring a cup of sweetened tea into the sea and throwing in it a sapphire ring from her mother, but nothing happened. Another story of Rose Hsu mentions Old Mr.Chou, the guardian of a door that opened into dreams, of whom Rose usually had nightmares as a child, because she thought he was controlled by her mother. An-mei’s retells an event from her childhood when she learned to swallow her own tears in order not to feed anyone else with her misery. When her mother left her, she sat near the pond in their backyard and started to cry. A turtle swam by and started to eat her tears and then began to speak: “I have eaten your tears, and this is why I know your misery” (Tan 217). After that the turtle opened its beak and poured out seven eggs, out of which immediately hatched seven magpies, the birds of joy, and flew away laughing.

Superstition is highly present in the novel. Most of the examples like ghosts or various beliefs have already been described as part of other magical realist elements. In her story “Rice Husband”, Lena St.Clair describes how she believed to have killed a neighbor boy with her thoughts. That happened when she was nine years old. During a meal her mother told her she would marry a bad man when she looked into her rice bowl. She said that her future husband would have pock marks for every rice bowl she did not finish. She immediately remembered Arnold, a mean boy who always did bad things to her whenever she walked past him, so she started to eat everything there was on her plate. However, her mother always found something that was left unfinished and that scared Lena. She started to loathe that boy and eventually found a way to make him die -- she started leaving more and more food on her plate to create a reverse effect. Five years later, she found out that the boy died of complications from measles.

Throughout the novel, one’s physical appearance is seen as an indicator of one’s future life and mis/fortune. Lindo Jong describes how her grandmother foretold her future just by analyzing her face: her ears, nose, chin, forehead, and eyes. According to her facial features she concluded that Lindo’s life would be full of blessings, wealth, filled with some hardships and worries, and that she would be a good mother and wife. Ying Ying St.Clair was also very

superstitious -- she found bad omens everywhere. For example, when she was a young girl, she knew she would marry a family friend because he sliced open a watermelon in a vulgar way in front of her, which she interpreted as him taking her virginity. Later on, in San Francisco, when she and her new husband moved to a new apartment, she foretold her miscarriage because the streets were too steep. She also knew that her husband would die when a philodendron plant, he gave her as a sign of his love, wilted away.

In reminiscing her life's stories, June remembers the last dinner her mother organized for their family. She remembers what she thought was her mother's disappointment when she took the worst lobster for herself, leaving a better one for her mother, while everyone at the table chose only the best for themselves. Suyuan quickly gave her lobster to June and threw the bad one in the garbage. After the dinner, Suyuan gave a jade pendant to June who did not really understand its meaning at that time. "For a long time, I wanted to give you this necklace. See, I wore this on my skin, so when you put it on your skin, then you know my meaning. This is your life's importance" (Tan 208). Yet, after her "journey" to China June realizes that her mother was always proud of her and the person she became. Her mother saw her generosity and selflessness, as opposed to the others who showed only greed and ambition.

The novel concludes with June's story describing her and her father's trip to China, and the final meeting with her sisters. This finalizes her journey and her quest for self because she realizes that she is both American and Chinese. She no longer sees her mother's side and history as something distant and foreign and she accepts it: "And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is on our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go" (Tan 288).



## 7. Magical Realism in Contemporary African American Writing

The African Americans in the United States have a common slave history that dates back to the seventeenth century. Slaves were brought to the American grounds from many African tribes and villages by the Dutch, Danish, Portuguese, and British. By the nineteenth century the number of slaves grew into millions. They were used as cheap and dispensable labor force at rice, tobacco, indigo, sugar cane, and cotton plantations. The notion of coercive acculturation was found throughout slavery. It exercised practices that systematically stripped slaves of their African heritage. Slaves were punished for speaking their native language and were forced to acquire a taste for whites' food, religion, clothing, and values. This was a way of "taming" a dangerous enemy from within, to root out their language, culture, and any sense of historical identification. However, not all blacks in America were slaves. There were nearly half a million freed blacks, who lived mostly in urban areas. After the Civil War and abolishment of slavery many of the black Americans started to migrate to the urban North, where the segregation was not as accentuated as in the South. The larger northern cities like Detroit, Philadelphia or Chicago became magnets for the African Americans. The blacks have still not achieved the same level of assimilation as other immigrant or ethnic groups in America. Yet their culture has flourished nonetheless. Slavery and its aftermath has had a profound effect on their beliefs, moods, myths, facts and fancies -- their culture, both then and now (Levinson and Ember 10-19).

The contemporary African American novel deals mostly with the major themes of racism, freedom, slavery, identity and black community. The African American writing has a long and influential past. The early African American fiction originates from the slave narratives (Mulvey 18). Apart from the mostly oral storytelling which was common among the African slaves who were brought to the American grounds and which usually dealt with their traditional and cultural knowledge and folktales, the early written stories were mostly imaginative and did not really portray the authors or their community and history. The early novels were an attempt of recreating at that time popular „white's“ novels and were a „fusion“ of Gothic mystery, satire, pastoral, novel of manners, documents and polemics. After World War I, the term "Negro Renaissance" appeared. The factors that influenced it were the Great Migration of the former slaves from the rural South and the Caribbean to Northern cities, new intellectual currents concerned with cultural pluralism and anti-racism, dramatic growth of the black middle class and of literacy and the transformation of the American culture industry after 1915 (Mulvey, Fabi, Hutchinson and Rushdy 17-104). The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960's

and 1970's influenced and enabled many black authors to start writing about cultural pride and community building. Their aim was to raise the awareness of the black history and community. The movements brought changes like the proliferation of publishing industry, and new courses in colleges like Black Studies. "In the 1970's and 1980's, literature aimed at black readers was mostly restricted to specialty publishing houses, such as Holloway House and black-owned publishers, and to the occasional African American writer at a major publishing house" (Dietzel 165). According to Fritz Gysin, a great deal of African American novels that were written after 1970 were inspired by postmodernist themes. Such postmodernist novel:

...frequently questions the linearity of plot structure, confuses time sequences, blends levels of reality and fictionality, fragments characters, looks at events through several focalizing lenses arranged one behind the other, enjoys unreliable narrators, falls short of expectations, breaks rules, undermines conventions, and sometimes even resists interpretation. (Gysin 139)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Dubois coined the term "double-consciousness" to describe the bicultural identity of black Americans. This term is used to characterize African American experience -- a double vision as the product of the historical dialectic between black and white cultures. The black Americans were facing a constant dilemma whether to join Western society and its culture or to reject it. For the Africans transported to the New World as slaves, the double vision became a way of survival and a way of adapting to Western cultural systems while still trying to preserve some of their African heritage. In her novel, *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison strives for a fusion of the binary opposites of the spiritual and material world, and the most appropriate way to do that is by using magical realism (Noriega Sánchez 35).

## 8. Magical Realism in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977)

“When you know your name, you should hang on to it,  
for unless it is noted down and remembered,  
it will die when you do.”

(Morrison 329)

Toni Morrison is an award winning African American author born in 1931 in the poor, multiracial steel town of Lorrain, Ohio. Her most famous novels include *Beloved* (1987), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977), for which she was awarded the National Critics Circle Award and the Letters Award in 1978. *Beloved* was awarded the 1988 Pulitzer award for fiction, and she later on became the first African American woman writer who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Throughout her life she has been influenced by her family and their tradition, as well as the African American cultural rituals she was exposed to in her childhood and adolescence -- “the music, folklore, ghost stories, dreams, signs, and visitations...” (Unger and Litz Vol 2: 965).

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison describes a personal development of the main protagonist, Milkman Dead and his search for his identity. The novel is divided into two parts, the first of which describes Milkman’s passive, carefree life until his thirties, whereas the second part is focused on his identity quest, i.e. his trip back to his ancestral land in the South. Throughout the novel one can see many magical realist elements such as storytelling, the presence of a trickster figure and a “medicine woman”, dreams, circularity of time, ghosts, the use of magic, all of which provide this African American novel with a closure.

The novel’s plot starts in medias res, with a scene of an insurance policy agent Robert Smith killing himself by jumping off the Mercy Hospital. He left a note earlier that day for everyone to see, with a message of the time, date and place from which he would “leave” this place by flying with a pair of wings. He attracts a small crowd of people, among which are a pregnant woman Ruth Foster Dead and her two daughters, Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians. There is also another woman, Pilate Dead, a shabby looking lady who starts to sing a lullaby-like song from the top of her lungs looking at Mr. Smith. She soon speaks to Ruth, telling her that she will give birth the next day. During their conversation, Mr. Smith leaps off causing Pilate to start her song once more.

*O Sugarman done fly away*

*Sugarman done gone*

*Sugarman cut across the sky*

*Sugarman gone home... (Morrison 6)*

These two motifs mentioned above are the most important ones throughout the novel. On the one hand, there is the myth of a flying African -- that is one's ability to fly away from the troubles and problems back to safety-- and on the other hand there is the power of the song and oral tradition. The first motif, the myth of a flying African, dates back to the time of slavery. It is based on a folktale about one black slave who escaped slavery in the New World by flying back to Africa. This is actually the center of Morrison's novel, which is also clearly pointed out in its name as well. The song is about Solomon, an African slave who left his wife and his twenty one children and flew back to Africa, to freedom. Later on, in the second part of the novel, he turns out to be Milkman's great grandfather. As mentioned, the novel starts with one man's attempt to recreate the myth in order to free himself from his miserable life. Later on, it is described that Milkman's disappointment in life first appears at the age of four when he realizes that only birds and airplanes have the ability to fly. This motif is shown again at the end of the novel, after Pilate gets shot by Milkman's friend Guitar. A small bird takes a little brass box with her name written in it and flies away, signaling that "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (Morrison 336) and that her story will live on.

The second motif, Solomon's song, shows the power and the importance of storytelling and oral tradition, which is a common part of the African American tradition. The novel starts and ends with the song of the flying African, though modified at the beginning by Pilate who only vaguely remembers the song. In the second part of the novel, when Milkman travels south to Virginia and Shalimar, his ancestral land, he is exposed to the whole song and its meaning. He overhears the children in the street playing a game and singing "Solomon don't leave me" (Morrison 302). He strains to listen and to understand the song, and eventually concludes that the song is a story of his own people, of his great grandfather Solomon, who left his wife Ryna and twenty one children, among which the youngest one was Jake, Milkman's grandfather:"The song becomes a circular entity passed on from the ancestor to new generations" (Noriega Sánchez 52). The other example of the importance of songs is a scene where Macon Dead upon his return from work passes by the house of Pilate and hears her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar singing. According to Noriega Sánchez, it is a scene in which all the characteristics of oral tradition come together, namely a chorus, a song, and a listener (52). Macon Dead stops by the house and enjoys their music because it evokes so many childhood memories and takes him back to his past. He is deeply mesmerized by their voices and the moment seems endless:

As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave. He liked

looking at them freely this way. They didn't move. They simply stopped singing and Reba went on paring her toenails, Hagar threaded and unthreaded her hair, and Pilate swayed like a willow over her stirring. (Morrison 30)

At Hagar's funeral Pilate bursts into the chapel singing a song about mercy at the top of her lungs. She is soon joined by her daughter Reba and the two of them continue their eerie lament:

In a clear bluebell voice she sang it out-the one word held so long it became a sentence- and before the last syllable had died in the corners of the room, she was answered in a sweet soprano: "I hear you."

The people turned around. Reba had entered and was singing too. Pilate neither acknowledged her entrance nor missed a beat. She simply repeated the word "Mercy," and Reba replied. The daughter standing at the back of the chapel, the mother up front, they sang. (Morrison 317)

The scene shows the power of the song and one's own voice. One is presented a powerful mixture of two opposite voices which make the scene even more tragic by creating a chorus-like melody. Such scenes are characteristic of blues novels where "authors (...) employ blues and jazz to represent, on the one hand, the primitivism and exoticism of African Americans or the lower-class segment of the African American community; and on the other hand, the strength, individuality, and integrity of the folk" (Tracy 125).

One of the most important characters in the novel is Macon Dead's sister Pilate. She is a trickster figure in the novel, a magical character. She is a marginal character, constantly separated from the society around her for various reasons. One of them is her physical appearance; she is a very tall, shabby, unclean character who draws people away from her. Also, she has one distinctive feature on her body -- she has no navel because at her birth she literally crawled out of her mother's womb after her death. This makes her a pretty magical character and also evokes very negative and superstitious reactions from other people. Macon remembers her birth once:

After their mother died, she had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water. As a result, for all the years he knew her, her stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel. (...) Macon knew otherwise, because he was there and had seen the eyes of the midwife as his mother's legs collapsed. And heard as well her shouts when the baby, who they had believed was dead also, inched its way headfirst out of a still, silent, and indifferent cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her. (Morrison 27-8)

Pilate lives with her sexually addictive daughter Reba and her spoiled granddaughter Hagar. They live outside of the unnamed city on Michigan, in a very traditional, tribal way, without modern day privileges like electricity. This makes her a sort of a representative of the South, the old ways, as opposed to her brother who strives more towards the other path of wealth and power.

Pilate uses her power to help her sister-in-law in her sexually deprived and hateful marriage. Ruth's unhappiness is the reason she stays in the same city as her brother. She helps Ruth by concocting a love potion for Macon in order for him to fall in love with Ruth again. This has not got a long term effect, but it helps Ruth and Macon conceive a child, Milkman. Ruth's need for Pilate continues after the conception because Pilate prevents Macon from killing his unborn child. She threatens him with a voodoo doll of him, which makes his murderous attempts final. This shows her tribal traits as she uses old magic and rituals for protection. According to Milkman, Pilate also has the ability to change her physical appearance. When meeting her for the first time, he describes her as a very tall, strong woman, a "lady who had one earring, no navel, and looked like a tall black tree" (Morrison 39). However, later on when she comes to jail to bail him and Guitar out, she appears to be a weak older lady, who is physically completely different: "She didn't even look the same. She looked short. Short and pitiful" (Morrison 205). Even after that event, Milkman reflects upon it and the thing he saw: "Pilate *had* been shorter. As she stood there in the receiving room of the jail, she didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulder- and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own chin. (...) Even her eyes, those big sleepy old eyes, were small..." (Morrison 206-7). Moreover, while driving back home with Milkman and his father Pilate again changes back into her old self. This is described like a completely everyday situation and is in fact accepted as such. Only later does Milkman ponder on that memory and tries to understand the possibility of her change. Pilate also claims to be able to talk to her long time deceased father's ghost: "I see him still. He's real helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know" (Morrison 141). She claims he follows her and sometimes even speaks to her, telling her to sing, or not to fly off without a body, which she understands literally, and carries around a big green sack filled with human bones supposedly of a white man whom she and her brother killed long, long time ago. She is a good storyteller. Upon her and Milkman's first encounter she tells him and Guitar a story about a man she once tried to save from falling off a cliff. This was no ordinary situation, because it occurred in the man's kitchen, a place with no cliffs whatsoever. Yet she saw in his face and his behavior that he really was there and she held him not to stumble over the edge. Unfortunately, she was interrupted by his wife and the moment she let go of the man, he fell down on the floor dead.

What difference does it make if the thing you scared of is real or not? I remember doing laundry for a man and his wife once, down in Virginia. The husband came into the kitchen one afternoon shivering and saying did I have any coffee made. I asked him what was it that had grabbed hold of him, he looked so bad. He said he couldn't figure it out, but he felt like he was about to fall off a cliff. Standing right there on that yellow and white and red linoleum, as level as flatiron. He was holding on to the door first, then the chair, trying his best not to fall down. I opened my mouth to tell him wasn't no cliff in that kitchen. Then I remembered how it was being in those woods. I felt it all over again. So I told the man did he want me to hold on to him so he couldn't fall. He looked at me with the most grateful look in the world. 'Would you?' he said. I walked around back of him and locked my fingers in front of his chest and held on to him. His heart was kicking under his vest like a mule in heat. But little by little it calmed down. (...)But soon's I let go he fell dead-weight to the floor. Smashed his glasses and everything. Fell right on his face. And you know what? He went down so slow. I swear it took three minutes, three whole minutes to go from a standing upright position to when he mashed his face on the floor. I don't know if the cliff was real or not, but it took him three minutes to fall down it. (Morrison 41-2)

Pilate uses her storytelling to soothe a conflict situation between Ruth and her granddaughter Hagar. When Milkman left Hagar after a yearlong relationship, she turned into a madwoman whose only mission was to bring him back to her or take his life. Ruth's maternal instincts awake and she goes to Hagar to defend her son. In order to prevent any violent outcome, Pilate starts to tell a story on her own life, from the moment she and her brother Macon witnessed their father's death to the present, and eventually captivates Ruth's attention and manages to keep her away.

Names and their meanings are also an important aspect in the novel. One could start with Macon Dead's father, who owns his name to a drunken white officer. The officer upon signing him up as a slave misunderstood him and instead of Macon Dead's birthplace he wrote Macon as his name. When Macon answered that his father was dead, the officer wrote it as his surname, Dead. In that way, by mistake, Macon Dead Sr. lost his family name, his history and also his identity: "He didn't have to keep the name, did he? He could have used his real name, couldn't he?" "Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out" (Morrison 53-4). Many of the other characters in the novel got their names in an unusual way. For example, Pilate was named after a Biblical character. Yet, that was not for the religious reason, but rather because her name looked powerful to her illiterate father in the Bible on a

randomly opened page. His son, Macon Dead Jr., names his two daughters the same way because he wants to honor the tradition started by his father. He uses the Bible to name his daughters Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians. Pilate gives her own daughter a Biblical name as well; she calls her Rebecca, which is shortened in the novel to Reba. At the beginning of the novel, the naming is also visible. For example, the Mercy Hospital is called “No Mercy Hospital” because it does not accept black patients. Similarly, the street, in which Ruth’s father dr. Foster, the only black doctor, lived is called “Not Doctor Street”. Its original name was Mains Avenue, but the townspeople renamed it to “Doctor Street”. The name became so popular that the town legislators had to post the notices throughout the town that Mains Avenue is not “Doctor Street”. To appease them, the residents started to call it “Not Doctor Street” and the name remained. A place in the South, where Milkman discovers his roots and finally finds out his family’s history is called Shalimar. It got its name after Solomon, the famous slave who flew away back to Africa: “Even the name of the town sounded like Solomon: Shalimar, which Mr.Solomon and everybody else pronounced *Shalleemone*” (Morrison 302). The origin of Milkman’s name is pretty unusual. His real name is also Macon Dead, but after one incident when he was little, no one called him like that. His mother, frustrated with her life, found two occupations that kept her sane -- polishing an unusual watermark on the kitchen table, and breastfeeding her son past beyond the appropriate age for it. She was caught breastfeeding him one afternoon by a tenant Freddie, who spread the child’s new nickname: “A milkman. That’s what you got there, Miss Rufie. A natural milkman if ever I seen one. Look out, womens. Here he come. Huh!” (Morrison 15).

The novel also contains elements of a mythical quest. The quest starts upon Macon Dead’s cognition that Pilate keeps a green tarpaulin hanging in her house. He reveals then his and his sister’s secret to Milkman: after their father’s tragic death, Macon and Pilate were secretly taken to the house of their father’s murderers by a housemaid called Circe. She kept them hidden for a while, but then they left the house wandering in the forest. One day they saw their father’s ghost and followed it to a cave in the mountain. There they found a white man who was hiding his gold, and Macon killed him. Macon wanted to take the gold, but Pilate did not, so they argued and eventually left the cave. A few days later, Macon returned for the gold only to discover it was missing, together with the white man’s green tarpaulin. That was the last time he saw Pilate until she came back years later. Macon asks Milkman to go over to Pilate’s house and steal the tarpaulin, presuming it is probably still filled with gold, but it turns out it only contains human bones and different rocks. Pilate confesses to Macon then that she returned many years



later to the cave because she listened to their father's ghost telling her that she should take the body of a man whose life she took with herself to rest his spirit:

“You just can't fly on off and leave a body”, he tole me. A human life is precious. You shouldn't fly off and leave it. So I knew right away what he meant cause he was right there when we did it. He meant that if you take a life, then you own it. You responsible for it. You can't get rid of nobody by killing them. (Morrison 208)

Macon believes that the gold is still in the mountains so he sends Milkman on a journey. Milkman sees this journey as an opportunity to finally emancipate himself from others and sees the gold as a means to do it: “He had stopped evading things, sliding through, over, and around difficulties. Before he had taken risks only with Guitar. Now he took them alone” (Morrison 271).

On his journey he meets different people who help him discover his family's history. He meets Reverend Cooper, who was an old friend of his grandfather and who reveals him some facts about his father and Pilate from the time when they were little, which makes Milkman intrigued to find out more about that period of their lives. He is then taken to the estate, that is the house in which the white family who killed his grandfather lived. It is called Lincoln's Heaven. There he meets Circe, a housemaid and local midwife, who delivered almost all the children in the town. Circe is depicted as an ageless witch, a magical figure. Reverend Cooper tells Milkman that she was about a hundred years old when he was a child. This seems pretty hard to believe, but Milkman is convinced upon seeing her: “She was old. So old she was colorless. So old only her mouth and eyes were distinguishable features in her face” (Morrison 240). She tells him a lot about his family and the events in the past, including the information that they later buried Macon Dead in that same cave where Macon and Pilate killed the white man. That indicates that Pilate, many years later, when she returned from Virginia back to Lincoln's Heaven, had taken her father's bones with her and has been guarding them ever since. Milkman realizes that there is no gold, and wants to go on to a town of Shalimar, where his grandfather came from, to discover more about his history. On his way to the South, Milkman is stripped off his former identity, or the lack of it. This is visible both spiritually and physically. All of his middle class outfit and equipment eventually loses its function and is destroyed along the way. He goes back to the different civilization and different way of life, which incites his new way of thinking and seeing the world. He wants to know more about himself and does not care about the wealth or other people's wishes for that matter. He realizes that he was used by others for far too long: “Everybody wants something from me, you know what I mean? Something they think I got. I

don't know what it is- I mean what it is they really want" (Morrison 222). There he is seen as an outsider because he is from the North, but he still feels the southern hospitality and people's different approach to foreigners. He is even invited to a hunting session with some locals, where he ends up attacked by his former best friend Guitar, who wants to kill him. After the hunt he is sent to a woman, Sweet, who can offer him a place to stay in the town. As a part of every quest, the hero gets a prize, a woman, and Sweet is Milkman's prize. At this point Milkman's change is obvious. For the first time in his life he starts to think of other people's feelings. After the bathing and lovemaking, he offers Sweet to bathe her, which shows his newly discovered compassionate side and his first selfless act. During his stay in Shalimar, he hears children playing a game in the street and singing a popular tune about Solomon. He really strains to understand and decipher the lyrics, which leads him to a breakthrough in his quest -- he learns his grandfather's and great grandmother's name. He also finds a woman, Susan Byrd, a distant cousin, who tells him about his grandmother Sing who was of Indian descent and not a slave.

And there was something more. It wasn't true what he'd said to Susan Byrd: that it wasn't important to find his people. Ever since Danville, his interest in his own people, not just the ones he met, had been growing. Macon Dead, also known as Jake somebody. Sing. Who were they, and what were they like? The man who sat for five nights on a fence with a gun, waiting. Who named his baby girl Pilate, who tore a farm out of wilderness ... (Morrison 293)

After finding everything out, Milkman's faith in flying restores. He is truly happy that he finally discovered his roots and his past:

"He could fly! You hear me? My great-granddaddy could fly! Goddam! " He whipped the water with his fists, then jumped straight up as though he too could take off, and landed on his back and sank down, his mouth and eyes full of water. Up again. Still pounding, leaping, diving. "The son of a bitch could fly! (...)" (Morrison 328)

Milkman returns home and tells Pilate everything. They decide to go back to the cave to bury the bones of Macon Dead Sr. back where they belong. Back at the cave, after the burial, they are attacked by Guitar for the second time. Angry at them for not sharing the supposedly found gold, he shoots Pilate. She dies to a tune of Solomon's song sung by Milkman, but a bit altered to fit her more properly: "Sugargirl don't leave me here/ Cotton balls to choke me/ Sugargirl don't leave me here/ Buckra's arms to yoke me" (Morrison 336). The end of the novel is ambiguous; one can interpret it in such a way that Milkman dies, shot by Guitar, or that he saves himself by flying away, which is more appropriate considering the content of the novel and the whole story.

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees- he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it. (Morrison 337)

The end of the novel, even though it is ambiguous, gives Milkman's quest a closure. He finally frees himself and completes his story by becoming aware of his roots and himself as an individual. He starts to believe in the unbelievable and impossible, and that is the important trait of the whole novel. Toni Morrison uses magical realism to engage the reader into her world; she helps the reader cross the boundaries of the world inside the novel and makes them a part of it. By accepting the unnatural elements as something ordinary and necessary, both the reader and the main protagonist become a part of that world.

## Conclusion

Magical realism, as a rather new style in literature, has found its use in American ethnic writing. It is used by ethnic, non-Western authors to depict their own worlds, their own culture and history in an unconventional and unusual way. Each of the authors represented in this paper uses magical realism to present and more easily engage the non-Western reader into her stories. In their novels a certain “textualization of the reader” occurs, whereby boundaries between the world of the reader and the fictional world get unstable and blurred. The reader is engaged as a constituent of the plot and its ultimate meaning.

In magical realism dreams are not distinguished from reality, and they are accepted as part of ordinary everyday life. Elements such as the use of the supernatural, the existence of multiple worlds and dimensions, and use of magic are integrated into rationality and materiality of the world. When comparing it to realism, which objectively represents reality, magical realism is more eccentric, and gives more space for diversity and magic. Magic here serves as a cultural corrective, and with folk wisdom, it is a part of a community’s collective memory. Community is more important than the individual, and each member has to contribute to the preservation of its past in order to maintain it. Magical realism, according to Miguel Angel Asturias, belongs to the so called “third reality”, which is a fusion between the real -- visible and tangible -- reality and between the magical reality, that is, dreams and hallucinations.

Ethnic novels are more likely to use magical realism because it helps them connect with the audience that is not used to their beliefs and way of thinking. It helps the authors use their novels as a certain reminder to the reader and ethnic community of the past events, beliefs and overall tradition that is not to be forgotten. Each of the four authors belongs to a certain ethnic group that has had its share in American history. They use magical realism to depict their struggle to assimilate into American society by maintaining their ethnicity. Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich both belong to Native American nations, whose five-hundred-year-old history of hardship resulting from the European colonization of America forced them to strengthen their oral tradition and rituals because that was the only heritage they could save and keep for themselves. Amy Tan shows the life of the first immigrant and second Chinese American generation, their way of adapting and assimilating into the American society, as well as the ways of preserving their Chinese culture and heritage. Toni Morrison presents the African American community. She uses elements of the blues novel, where the power of the song is accentuated. In her novel she presents a middle class protagonist and society that has forgotten

its roots and origin. Through magical realist elements and characters, she enables the characters to discover their forgotten past.

The subject of an identity quest can be found in the novels *Ceremony*, *The Joy Luck Club* and *Song of Solomon*. In *Ceremony*, Silko shows a marginal character Tayo, a mixed-blood Indian and a war veteran, who tries to assimilate into the Laguna society. She portrays his attempts at curing himself of the postwar “sickness”, where he with the help of a medicine man, engages in a quest for his Indian self. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the search of the main protagonist June Woo for her roots engages a number of other characters, whose identity quests also become visible throughout the novel. Amy Tan manages to incorporate seven different narrators whose stories intertwine and form a whole that leads June Woo to her happy ending. *Song of Solomon* on the other hand, shows how a communal myth and a song can lead a young man on a path of self-discovery.

Other magical realist elements occur throughout the novels, like the important role of “medicine men” and women: old Betonie in *Ceremony*, Nanapush in *Tracks* or Pilate and Circe in *Song of Solomon*. They guide the main protagonists on their way and have a certain mysterious power and knowledge of the world around them. In addition, the authors insert magical creatures, various rituals, trickster figures, metamorphoses, legends and various superstitions, with which they influence the characters in the story as well as the reader.

However, the most important magical realist element in these texts is storytelling. Oral tradition has always been the most important part of every community, especially in ethnic ones. This is particularly visible in American ethnic novels. Due to their history of oppression, forced assimilation and identity loss, the only unbroken tie to their roots was the oral tradition - passing their knowledge and heritage through stories in order to keep at least some of their ethnic background intact. The Asian Americans however, immigrated to America in order to find better life, yet still insisted on keeping their tradition, customs and beliefs alive. Again, the easiest way to maintain that was storytelling.

To conclude, magical realism plays an important role in ethnic writing. It enables the authors to express their attitudes, beliefs and feelings, and to present their ethnic tradition in a way that is accessible both to other members of the ethnic society, who become aware of their past and heritage, and to the Western readers, who get an insight into the worlds far different from their own.

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