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Ruffling and Un-Ruffling *Feathers*: Magical Realism as a Tool of Postcolonial Dissent and Transcendence

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Abstract

This paper claims that the Egyptian movie, *Feathers* (El Zohairy 2021) uses the genre of magical realism as a tool of postcolonial dissent and transcendence: by providing insight into social injustice, by transcending norms and realities, and by deflecting censorship. The paper argues that *Feathers* has used magical realism to both provoke (ruffle) and deflect (un-ruffle) political outrage. This movie depicts the liberating journey of a rural housewife whose bullying husband has been magically turned into a chicken, relentlessly echoing the traditional Egyptian proverb that ‘one woman is worth a hundred men’ (‘El sett B 100 ragel’). The film received international critical acclaim at the Cannes Film Festival. But nationalistic critics and directors have used post-colonial discourse to accuse its director of Othering and belittling Egypt. This paper in contrast uses multimodal discourse analysis to explore the ways in which *Feathers* uses magical realism to highlight and personalize and transcend the social injustice in Egypt, and in the Third World. On the other hand, *Feathers* deflects political outrage by using magical realism to locate its characters and plot in the past, by depicting local businesses rather than transnational investments and megaprojects, and by exploring the magic of personal transformation. By using magical realism as a tool of postcolonial dissent and transcendence, the director has portrayed important truths behind Egyptian norms and realities, and at the same time miraculously protected both the movie and himself.

Keywords: *Feathers*, Postcolonial Dissent, Transcendence, Magical Realism

1. Introduction

Film director Omar El Zohairy’s black comedy, *Feathers* achieved the Grand Prize at Critics’ Week in Cannes – the first Egyptian film that has ever succeeded in this part of the Cannes film festival (The National 2021).

This avant-garde movie uses magical realism to tell the story of a housewife who has to take care of herself and her young family because her husband, the traditional, stereotypical, authoritarian, patriarchal, Middle East father figure, has been turned into a chicken by the magicians that have been invited to their four-year-old son’s birthday

party. The magicians can't turn him back again. She discovers that her husband is behind on their rent so she has to find a job. The film is about her struggle for survival and dignity.

The director's assessment of his movie places it directly in the genre of magical realism as he informs us that the film is 'about a woman who believes her husband is a chicken' (ibid). He also tells us that the central character should evoke our sympathy, because 'she has the survivor problem,' and that 'to survive, she has to face her fears' (ibid). True to the magical realism genre, he tells us that 'the chicken was a bridge to jump into her character and see the world through her eyes' (ibid).

The director attributed the success of the film to his artistic vision and commitment, saying, 'It is so bold to give the film the prize. It proves that if you believe in your artistic vision and don't compromise, it can take you to good places' (ibid).

Feathers hit the screens in Paris in mid-July, 2021, winning the Critics' Week Grand Prize (during La Semaine de la Critique) and collecting the International Federation of Film Critics Award for best first feature film at the 74th Cannes Film Festival. In an official ceremony at the Egyptian National Centre of Cinema, the Egyptian Minister of Culture in Egypt lauded this historic achievement 'as it is also the first Egyptian participation in the competition,' (El Ahram 2021). In August 2021, it also won best film, best director, and best screenplay award at Cairo's Arab Cinema Centre. Here, 167 film critics representing 68 different countries recognised the value of this piece of magical realism.

However, the international and national success and acclaim of *Feathers* has been shadowed by political repercussions. In August 2021, at the El Gouna Film Festival, in a prominent and prestigious luxury resort on the Red Sea, *Feathers* indeed ruffled feathers. Renowned representatives of the Egyptian film industry seized this opportunity to 'perform' and promote their nationalistic beliefs and interests, by declaring that *Feathers* portrayed Egypt in a negative light, and storming out (El Ahram 2021). One actor and household name, Sherif Mounir charged the filmmaker with defaming Egypt 'by deliberately focusing on poverty and by ignoring the government's achievements in eradicating shanty towns' (ibid).

The official national newspaper, El Ahram on the other hand rallied to the defense of the film. It denounced this 'aggressive social media debate about patriotism and freedom of speech' as 'sycophantic and hypocritical hate speech,' and announced that President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and the Decent Life Initiative, dedicated to the modernization of rural communities supported the film and the director (ibid).

This paper argues that magical realism played an important role in the success and survival of this film, its main role being to critique political injustice, inequality, and patriarchy, to highlight the drab spectacle of poverty, repression, and marginalization in Egypt and in the Third World.

It also claims that *Feathers* deflects political outrage by using magical realism, 1) to locate its characters and plot in the past, 2) to depict grubby local businesses rather than gleaming transnational investments and megaprojects, and 3) to explore the magic of personal transformation. By using magical realism, the director has portrayed important truths behind Egyptian realities and protected both the movie and himself.

In short, this paper claims that the Egyptian movie, *Feathers* (El Zohairy 2021) uses the genre of magical realism as a tool of postcolonial dissent and transcendence: by providing political, social and economic insight into a repressive regime, by transcending national norms and realities, and by muting censorship.

This paper will therefore explore the theoretical and practical use of magical realism in general and in this film in particular in order to provide insight into the use and usefulness of magical realism as a tool of postcolonial dissent, as a method of critiquing and transcending political, social and economic realities, and as a method of avoiding censorship.

2. General insight into magical realism

Flores (1995, p. 112) argues that magical realism is ‘the amalgamation of realism and fantasy’. He defines magical realism as the ‘transformation of the common and everyday into the awesome and the unreal’ where ‘time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality’ (pp. 114-15). Roh (1995) discusses the role of magical realism, claiming that its role is to enlighten us: to return us to reality ‘by uncovering its hidden mystery’ (p. 16). He suggests that the goal of magical realism is to reveal the mystery that ‘hides and palpitates behind the represented world’ (ibid).

Leal (1995) concurs. He argues that magical realism is based on confronting reality, and trying to untangle it (p. 121). He suggests that the central purpose of magical realism is ‘not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds’ but rather ‘the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances’ that cannot in the end be reduced to logic (pp. 122-123).

Alshehri (2022) makes an important distinction between realism and magical realism. She argues that realism is connected to one-sided single empirical realities and truths. But magical realism in contrast promotes the peaceful coexistence of the natural and the supernatural. She suggests that magical realism is double-edged, reflecting ‘the presence of fantastical elements that depart from a recognisable, real physical world. Thus, magical realism is characterised,

‘by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an enlightened and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality’ (Chanady 1985, pp. 21-22).

Faris (1995) provides more detailed insight into the main elements in magical realism. Firstly, she explores the ‘irreducible element of magic’ in magical realism that disrupts the logic of cause and effect (p. 167). The reader is therefore caught between different readings, between interpreting those magical transformations as hallucinations, miracles or allegories (pp. 171-72). On the one hand there is a strong sense of the real, and in some cases of historical realities such as genocides (pp. 169-70). But there is also a closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds’ such as the one between the living and the dead (p. 172) or between fact and fiction (p. 173). Here magical realism questions objective reality. But last and perhaps most important of all is the transformation of characters that compels the reader to ‘question received ideas about time, space and identity’ (ibid).

In conclusion, magical realism often reflects ‘ancient systems of belief and local lore’ designed to challenge the claims and illusions of the modern world (p. 182).

3. Magical realism as a tool of postcolonial dissent and transcendence

Bowers (2004) argues that magical realism tends to be postcolonial, because ‘much of it is set in a postcolonial context and written from a postcolonial perspective that challenges our authoritative colonialist attitude’ (p. 90). She understands postcolonialism to be ‘the political and social attitude that opposes colonial power’ and argues that postcolonialism is not just about one nation ruling over another but also about ‘changing the colonised people’s thinking and belief’ and imposing ‘a homogeneous, authoritative, historical and cultural identity on the colonised nation’ (p. 91). Based on this postcolonial context, she argues that magical realism ‘provides a means to recover not only the past but also the creative and spiritual aspects of the colonised people’ (p. 91).

This paper is based on two important streams of postcolonial thought and political communication: Orientalism (Said 1979), hybridity, and the interstice (Bhabha 1990; 1994). In the classic postcolonial text, *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said argues that the colonial powers portrayed the East as either inferior or in need of corrective study. Orientalism creates ‘an absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior’ (p. 300). Orientalism is colonial or colonised knowledge,

'Knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline, or governing' (p. 41).

This colonial portrayal of the Orient as the Inferior Other reinforced colonisation 'because it reinforced, and was reinforced by, the certain knowledge that Europe or the West literally commanded the vastly greater part of the earth's surface' (ibid). Orientalism is therefore based on the distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority' (p. 142), and between Us (Westerners) and Them (Orientals) (p. 45), thereby limiting 'the human encounter between different cultures, traditions and societies' (p. 46). Parker and Starkey (1995) suggest that the colonial and neo-colonial media 'construct' the East, noting that the European colonists considered vast regions of the world merely as blank spaces, lands that lie beyond the colonial narrative, that they are waiting to map, mine, and write into existence. Said concludes that Orientalism reflects colonial intent to 'control, manipulate, even incorporate, what is a manifestly different world' (Said 1978: 12).

Homi Bhabha (2004) on the other hand challenges the claim that the Orient is the passive object of hegemonic colonial control, arguing instead that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is reciprocal. Bhabha is optimistic about postcolonial communication and about magical realism as a tool of critique and transcendence. Accordingly, Bhabha portrays magical realism as 'the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world' (1990, p. 7).

Bhabha argues that the individual who has been colonised identifies both with the coloniser and with the colonised. Colonised cultures are based on hybridity: hybridity opens up the interstice, a liminal, in-between space that 'gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation' (Bhabha 1994, p. 37). In this third space, meanings and identities are negotiated, and transcend hierarchies (Bhabha 1994, p. 4). Magical realism is therefore committed to speaking out against social injustice, marginalization and oppression, creating counter-discourses that challenge colonial hegemonies (Hart & Ouyang 2005).

Zamora and Faris (1995) agree that 'magical realism is a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic' (p. 5). They claim that magical realism is subversive: 'their in-betweenness, their all-at-oneness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures' (p. 6). Alshehri (2022, p. 4) makes a similar claim, arguing that magical realism is marginal to the dominant values of communities, and that the goal of magical realism is to subvert mainstream ideologies. She suggests that magic realism has been used in the Middle East to represent the perspectives of marginal communities, and argues that magical realism has been used 'to destabilise the coloniser/colonised relationship' and to provide a voice to the marginalized, because,

'Magical realism is art in itself and art that acts to question how human experience is shaped, restricted, and unjust. Magical realism functions therefore as an ideological discourse. It undermines the Western way of thinking which is based on science and logic [by inserting] mythical and supernatural elements' (p. 33).

Magical realism therefore challenges 'the predominant and hegemonic Western mode of realism, which is, at least in general, based on empirical knowledge and grounds its invented worlds on objectively verifiable physical environments and actions' and laws of causes and effect (ibid). Magical realism is based on 'the juxtaposition of objective and subjective realities in ways that call the objective into question, allowing the authors to challenge official readings of social, political, and historical events' (Rodgers 2004, p. 284). Lang (2020) concurs, arguing that 'one of the most distinctive thematic concerns of magical realism is the exploration of the margins ... marginal subjectivities, classes, spaces, and ways of thinking [that challenge] dominant centres of power in late-capitalist culture' (p. 177). Summing up, Warnes (2005) argues that writers choose magical realism as a narrative technique because of an 'urge to reclaim what has been stolen or lost, to critique the assumptions and conventions of the metropolis, to recover and affirm identities, and to assert autonomy in the face of hegemony' (p. 18).

The Colombian magical realist author, Gabriel Garcia Marquez takes up this thread during his Nobel Prize lecture on 8 December, 1982. Here he questions the one-sided inflexible nature of colonial realism, and the insatiable

creativity of the colonised, the sorrow and beauty ‘that lives in us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths’. He suggests that this is ‘the crux of our solitude’ and that magical realism is ‘a means to render our lives believable’.

4. Important examples of magical realism

This part of the paper compares and contrasts two important examples of magical realism, Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Naguib Mahfouz’s *Arabian Nights and Days* (1995), in order to understand the political and social dimensions of this genre in more depth and detail.

Magical realism has a broad geographical, intercontinental, cultural scope. For instance, Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) reveals unknown aspects of the land and people of Latin America. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980) reflects on India’s independence from British colonialism. Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* (1982) addresses gender and class inequality. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) responds to the slavery of Black people in America. Naguib Mahfouz’s *Arabian Nights and Days* discusses political injustice in Egypt.

Both these masterpieces of magical realism challenge social injustice and the rigid boundaries of the dominant Western realism by incorporating magic. This magic often has its source in indigenous cultures and local belief systems.

One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) chronicles one hundred years in the history of an imaginary town in Colombia called Macondo, documenting the harrowing effects of colonization and modernization. *Arabian Nights and Days* (1995) similarly documents the harrowing effects of tyranny and corruption in an imaginary alley in Egypt.

Both of these masterpieces of magical realism are allegories of political and social injustice. *Solitude* (1967) discusses the history of repression and uprising in Colombia from the Spanish Conquest to the Thousand Days’ War between Liberals and Conservatives in the 19th Century to the labour struggles and the massacre of protesters in the 20th Century. *Arabian Nights* (1995) discusses the history of Egypt during the 1970s, the injustice and inequalities that resulted from the Open Door (Infitah) policies, Islamic fundamentalism, corruption and unemployment. Harsh realities include the Bread Riots (1972), the Egypt-Israel conflict and peace agreement (1979), and the arrest of 1,500 intellectuals (1981).

Both of these novels use magical realism as a postcolonial tool of dissent and transcendence. In one chapter of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Solitude*, the legendary hero, José Arcadio Segundo miraculously survives a massacre of three thousand four hundred and eight demonstrators who strike against the United Fruit Company. Then magic descends on Macondo in the form of insomnia so no-one can remember the horrors that the military regime had inflicted on them.

Naguib Mahfouz’s *Arabian Nights*, in contrast is set in Shahriyar’s sultanate after one thousand and one nights, after he has supposedly pardoned Shahrazad and seen the errors of his ways. Supernatural forces intervene, producing ‘a series of murders, arrests, interrogations, confessions, and executions’ (Abdel Nasser 2015). The chief of police Gamasa al-Bulti is transformed into Abdullah of the Land. One of the demons, Anees al-Galees causes a madness ‘engulfed the quarter like a deluge’ (p. 134). This demon seduces the rulers of the alley and threatens to expose their utter shamelessness.

In this piece of magical realism, reality, dreams and nightmares are intertwined: in Chapter 4, Sanaan al-Gamali’s suffering begins in a dream where he hears a voice ‘which provokes him to commit a murder which costs him his life’ (Abu Jweid 2020). She is the voice of the oppressed, so she tells him ‘What troublesome creatures you are! You don’t stop yearning to enslave us in order to achieve your vile objectives. Have you not satisfied your greed by enslaving the weak among you?’ (*Arabian Nights* 1995, p. 12).

5. Method

This paper uses multimodal discourse analysis to explore the use of magical realism in the film, *Feathers* (El Zohairy 2021), claiming that this film uses magical realism to critique and personalize and transcend the social injustice in Egypt, and in the Third World.

This article uses multimodal discourse analysis to investigate the interaction between language, audio and video in this film. This type of discourse analysis provides useful insight into the power and significance and persuasiveness of multimodal productions (Kress 2011). Multimodal discourse analysis is particularly insightful because it recognises the crucial role of polysemy (Phillips and Ghalwash 2019), because the interweaving of semiotic resources – the language (Halliday 1978), the audio (Pauletto 2012), the video (Block 2007) – all contribute to the power and meaning of the text. This interpretation of the postcolonial, transformational significance of *Feathers* (2021) is therefore based on a nuanced interpretation of interwoven multimodal elements such as language, audio (silence, speech, music, sound effects), and video (space, line, shape, tone, colour, movement, and rhythm).

6. *Feathers* (El Zohairy 2021)

The purpose of this part of the paper is to explore the use of magical realism in *Feathers*: providing insight into social injustice, into transcending norms and realities, and into deflecting censorship.

The main character in this movie is a wife and mother representing the traditional low-income Egyptian family unit and proletariat. In the beginning of the film, she is living a stereotypical traditional life with her husband and three children. Her subservient lifestyle is depicted according to the dictates of realism, the patriarchal language of the husband and the silence of the wife are reflected in the public and domestic roles of the husband and father (humiliated in the factory, lording it over his family) and the wife and mother (humiliated at home, doomed to the endless drudge of domestic service and child raising).

Then magical realism kicks in. Her husband is magically transformed into a chicken, and her journey of personal transformation begins.

6.1. *Insight into political, social and economic injustice*

6.1.1. Patriarchy

The movie explores the repressed status of women in traditional Egyptian society, revealing the hardships that women must go through alone as single mothers or as the main bread winners as their husbands become unproductive and marginalised, and returning again and again to the central proverbial theme of ‘El sett B 100 ragel’: ‘one woman is worth a hundred men’. The movie shows the submission of women in the home and in the outside world. Traditional patriarchal relations are replicated in the factory too. Her survival is premised on betraying her husband.

In the beginning, the protagonist presents herself as dependent on her husband. Her body language, lowered gaze, silences, and lowered voice reflect and perpetuate her submissiveness. The husband represents himself as the master of the house and breadwinner through the orders and instructions he issues to his wife. This is also reflected in video and audio: his overpowering body language, his peremptory use of language and voice, tone and volume. In two scenes, the wife is depicted, head lowered in deference, as she gives her husband his shoes and coat to wear and he outlines her domestic duties that include the food she must prepare and he unpeels the notes. She doesn’t eat with him. Traditional domestic routines are updated in the modern world. She does her domestic chores as the father and children sit in front of the Television.

The husband is her only connection to the outside world; he is the one that bring gifts for the children. He issues peremptory orders such as, ‘Don’t want any mess tomorrow,’ to which the housewife replies, without a trace of

irony, 'Okay, Pasha.' He brings myths of the outside world into the house, telling her that on one occasion, on being invited as part of a delegation, 'Everyone got a small genetically modified cow on a plate'.

The house itself echoes the miserable condition of the Egyptian proletariat. Everything that should be white has been greyed by the factory smoke. The walls and tiles are stained; the cupboards are scratched; the yellow sponge is protruding from the armchair; there are shots of the discoloured inside of a toilet bowl.

This drab realism continues even after the magic of the chicken has been performed. She is helpless and marginalised and propelled into the next cycle of patriarchal abuse at the hands of the factory boss. Here the intersectional critique of patriarchy and capitalism kicks in. Usurping the role of the husband and father magically turned into poultry, he bribes the mother with perfume and the children with gifts. The corruption at the base of capitalism is laid bare. He uses his ownership of the means of production and the ideological state apparatus (traditional music) to lay claim to her body, playing Fazia Ahmed's *On the Face of the Moon* to seduce her,

'On the Face of the Moon and in the sound of the rain,
On the trees' leaves I will write to you, my love.
On the streets and in the return of the dawn
I will write the two initials of your name and my name
I will draw a heart with an arrow.'

6.1.2. Industrial capitalism and the police state

The opening scene savagely portrays the scars of industrial capitalism in the Third World: beginning the film in darkness, the sound of a match struggling to ignite, the roar of flames and agony, the burning man silhouetted against the ghostly scaffolding of the factory. Once her husband has been transformed into a chicken, her very existence is threatened. The Ministry of Housing sends her the first message from the repressive state apparatus, notifying her that the rent payment is overdue, and that she will soon be homeless. Then, the Ministry evokes 'Penalty no. 4'. Nor can the neighbours help, because their position is also precarious. Later, the Ministry intervenes, confiscating her possessions, and leaving her destitute.

The implications of Third World capitalism pervade this film where everything is regularly reduced to bureaucratic procedures and capital, 'dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (Marx 1867, p. 834). Every little piece of support that the housewife and mother receives has to be paid for, and not just once. Some even refuse, because of the rules. For example, the magician at the circus is not allowed to help her out. This is ironic considering their precarious existence among the rubble and smoke of the factory.

Nor is money the solution to their grave existential problems, in fact the opposite. Professional advice is a profitmaking scam. One magician advises her to 'Stop eating birds and eggs until things get better!' Treating the chicken as she should be treated, giving her vitamins and putting her in an incubator 12 times a day, does not address the problem head on. The doctor promises that the husband will recover, even though he is clearly beyond the pale. But still she must pay the piper (capitalism) that plays the professional tune. The lewd boss peels off old notes in his periodic lame attempts to seduce her; it takes a bribe of chicken and rice to get him beaten up.

The police state, the ultimate repressive state apparatus is also indifferent to (perhaps complicit in) the plight of the husband and the family. The police abruptly dismiss the housewife as soon as she has reported her husband's disappearance. The final appearance of the police evokes bitter memories. The husband has been discovered among a group of homeless men without ID, he supposedly 'hasn't spoken or moved since he was arrested,' and his blackened stilled body evokes memories of political disappearances.

Her financial position renders her powerless, powerless even to mitigate the negative power of the magic. The children's screaming alert the mother to a chicken that has lost consciousness and has vomited. The magician admits his own limitations and sends her to a vet, that she can't afford. Her fleeting job as a domestic servant exposes the injustice in the class system. The woman of the house has untold riches and food, so the protagonist

steals some treats, and is caught by a dog that is treated better than her. He gets to eat the scraps of meat that she needed to feed her children. She is excluded from the labour market and her child has to sell his labour instead. Finally, seeing a hungry homeless man at the police station, she can finally feed him-- thereby, escaped the chains of poverty, like 'one woman out of a hundred men' (Egyptian proverb).

6.2. Transcending norms and realities

The magical transformation of the husband into a chicken is comically downplayed. The magician is insulted, accused of being possessed, and of being swindler, because he managed to turn the husband into a chicken but not to turn him back. He resorts to the usual subterfuges that repairmen use to calm their customers down, promising to fix it in half an hour, and later in ten minutes. He strokes the chicken's head, and conjures the husband's watch out of the chicken's nether regions, but to all intents and purposes it looks like he doesn't know what he is doing.

But the magic of the chicken precipitates a magical transformation in the character of the wife and mother.

In the beginning she is sympathetic towards her chicken husband, and dedicates time to his rescue. But over time she is uncomfortable with sleeping with the chicken in the same room, and she becomes empowered. Her husband returns home, helpless, motionless, and speechless, but she now looks down on him. She loses her fear of the capitalist boss, and becomes disgusted. In her thirst for freedom, she smothers her husband and slaughters the chicken that he has become.

Her bloody hands sear that Egyptian proverb into the minds of the audience, because she is clearly worth a hundred men at least. Like this, she fulfils the ideals of magical realism, by revealing the mystery that 'hides and palpitates behind the represented world' (Roh 1995).

Her own magical transformation and liberation is echoed in the final song,

'Hey Morning, cheer up
Hey Roses, open up
Hey Birds, sing in the silky breeze.
The sunrise is here, and the night has gone
This is our morning
Let's listen to the tune of the universe'

6.3. Deflecting censorship

Finally, this paper argues that magical realism has been used to avoid censorship. Firstly, because this is the core of its purpose, to critique repressive regimes, to challenge governmental monopolies on writing and re-writing history, to demonstrate 'the agonies of the persecuted,' and 'to emerge from those parts of the world where dictatorships prevail and as a result freedom of expression is under suppression' because, 'It is not possible for a writer to criticize a dictator explicitly and get away with it' (Inanç 2020, p. 3).

One of the techniques that this film has used to deflect censorship is to set it in the past, because 'Censorship of Artistic Works continues to curb films that criticise current regimes' (Ghazal 2018, p. 2) or challenge the ideologies of current leaders (p. 10). Methods include the grubby paper notes that are out of circulation, the box where the grubby notes are stashed, the retro television set, the old cassette player, the assorted bunch of old photos of all sizes that are used to identify (or not) the magician: this has all been digitalised during the current regime.

This technique in the end saved both the film and the director from the onslaught of disingenuous charges levelled by actors such as Sherif Moneer who stormed out of the official screening, declaring, 'I walked out because I saw exaggerated pictures that distorted our image – a family living in torment, and filth' because 'this made me feel very upset!' (The New Arab 2021) and MPs such as Mahmud Badr that used Twitter to denounce the 'making of a movie depicting your country as if there was no development' (The Arab Weekly 2021).

This all backfired because the director of *Feathers* blithely un-ruffled feathers, by asserting that there has been development in Egypt (side-stepping a critique of the status quo), and by suggesting that the film addressed the past rather than the glorious present or future of transnationalised Egypt (ibid).

7. Conclusion

This paper has claimed that magical realism is a powerful tool of postcolonial dissent and transcendence. The Egyptian movie, *Feathers* (El Zohairy 2021) provides important insights into the use of magical realism: critiquing social injustice, transcending repressive norms and realities, and protecting itself against censorship.

The paper has explored both the general nature and use of magical realism, and the political role of magical realism in postcolonial struggles. It concludes that there are two main streams in magical realism, one based on enlightened realism and the other on acceptance of the supernatural (Chanady 1985, pp. 21-22), and that the goal of magical realism is to inject magic in order to explore the mysterious relationship between people and the worlds that they inhabit (Leal 1995, pp. 122-123). Realism is often used to explore harsh realities such as genocides, and magic is often used to shatter the logic of cause and effect (Faris 1995).

This paper also insists that magical realism has a postcolonial role, and has been used to resuscitate 'the creative and spiritual aspects of the colonised people' (Bowers 2004, p. 91). The paper subscribes to the notion that hybrid postcolonial identities can transcend the 'absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior' (Said 1978, p. 300), and that the interstice 'gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation' (Bhabha 1994, p. 37). Magical realism is therefore committed to speaking out against social injustice, and challenging and transcending colonial hegemonies (Hart & Ouyang 2005; Alshehri 2022).

This paper has used multimodal discourse analysis to provide insight into postcolonial aspects of the film, *Feathers*, arguing that this film has used magic realism to critique and transcend political and social barriers, norms and realities.

On the level of realism, this movie shows the stereotypical submission of Eastern women in the home and outside, where her survival is premised on betraying her husband. His dominance and her dependence are represented in intertwined multimodal discourses of language, audio and video. He is the Pasha, and her lowered gaze and voice and silence reflect and perpetuate her inferior position. Her lowered gaze, silences, and lowered voice reflect and perpetuate her submissiveness. The miserable state of the house echoes the miserable state of the Egyptian proletariat. His old boss usurps his patriarchal role, using his position to seduce her, and laying bare the corruption at the base of capitalism. He bribes the mother with perfume, chocolate, and romantic music. How could she resist?

'On the Face of the Moon and in the sound of the rain,
On the trees' leaves I will write to you, my love.
On the streets and in the return of the dawn.'

The film is a savage critique of industrial capitalism and the police state, beginning with the suicide in the opening scene, the silence, the alienation, the sole burning man silhouetted against the scaffolding. Capitalism reduces the life of the protagonist to making payments. The survival and dignity of her and her family is premised on this. She has to pay the Ministry of Housing to keep her home. She has to pay the magician, the vet and the doctor to provide dubious professional advice. The magician recommends that she stops eating birds and eggs. The vet advises her to put the chicken in an incubator. The doctor promises her that her husband will recover even though he is a hopeless case. The lewd boss peels off old notes in his attempts to seduce her. Her job as a domestic servant exposes the injustice in a class system that places a pedigree dog above her. The police state is also indifferent to, or complicit in their plight. The charred lifeless body of the husband materialises in their station, evoking bitter memories of police brutality.

On the level of magic, there is a magical transformation in her character as she shoulders her proverbial role as the woman that is worth a hundred men. In the beginning she is sympathetic towards her chicken husband, but as time progresses and capitalism closes in, she becomes empowered. She loses her fear of the capitalist boss, smothers her husband, and slaughters the chicken that used to be him, thereby revealing the mystery that 'hides and palpitates' (Roh 1995) behind the reality. The mystery behind the reality in Egypt is that she, the Egyptian woman, is willing to bloody her hands in the struggle for survival. In the words of the song, there is no life or hope in Egypt without her,

'Hey Morning, cheer up
Hey Roses, open up ...
This is our morning
Let's listen to the rhythm of the universe'

Finally, magical realism has allowed this director to deflect censorship, by embedding this revolutionary message in this cautionary tale of a factory hand turned into poultry.

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