

“Real Isn’t How You Are Made”: Reconstructing the Real in *The Velveteen Rabbit*

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Abstract

The paper develops an interpretation of Postmodern reality in *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922) authored by Margery Williams Bianco. Reality is handled in the text as the most contested and subjective term that is based on how the receiver perceives and interprets, subsequently disavowing a monolithic view of reality. A vast dimension of reality adhering to the emotions of the characters that complicates the conventional understanding of reality shall be taken into account. The sensory perceptions of the characters create and transmit a sense of reality which is validated when love affirms itself as possessing a transformative effect on the characters. Without exploiting the thematic concern and relevance of the book, the paper attempts to problematize the fabric that constitutes reality. What lies crucial in the narrative is the manner in which fantasy functions as an apparatus that elides the boundaries and slippage between the real and the unreal. Additionally, fantasy functions as an alternate form of reality that manifests what lies beyond the apparent. The Baudrillardian notion of Simulacrum shall be put in place in order to question the presence of the real without definite and coherent origin of reality. The Posthumanist stance that surrounds the narrative breaks down the binary of human/non-human category while showcasing that non-human constitutes our very embodiment of being.

Keywords: Real, Simulacrum, Fantasy, Posthumanist



The word “Real” is frequently uttered, interrogated and discussed in *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which makes it the most teasing word, thereby inviting an important question regarding what lies beyond representations. Slavoj Žižek opines that the real is an “impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization and a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency” (190). It may be understood that from the postmodernist stance the notion of reality is impossible to be represented as something in which reality is deemed as an illusion and is not accessible. Hence, there is a difficulty in differentiating the copy from the original which makes the notion of the real troublesome and complex in the process of making meaning. An attempt to distinguish the real from the unreal elevates the difficulty of knowing reality that further breeds the collapse of the real and the illusion. The presence of a real beyond signifying concepts or images in the novel selected for the study makes it clear that the real cannot be reproduced which subsequently coincided with an interest in the ideas of Baudrillard and other postmodernist theorists. The question remains: what constitutes our knowledge of reality when the postmodernists interrogate and challenge the aspect of reality, truth and narrative beyond and behind the bounds of representations. Postmodernism is a radical shift from modernism within the realm of art, politics, painting, literature, philosophy, history, grand narrative, reality, ethics including various other aspects of human life and expression. Most importantly, postmodernism as a shift from modernity does not necessarily mean that postmodernism wholly abandons modernism, the nature of both these succeeding periods are defined thus:

What soon became labelled as postmodernism challenged the survival of modernism by contesting its claims to universality: its transhistorical assertions of value were no longer seen as based—as claimed—on reason or logic, but rather on a solid alliance with power...Yet postmodernism does not entirely negate modernism...Thus modernism’s dogmatic reductionism, its inability to deal with ambiguity and irony, and its denial of the validity of the past were all issues that were seriously examined and found wanting. (Hutcheon 26, 30)

Deviating from certain tenets of structured system of thoughts, meaning, representation, culture and other prevailing norms, postmodernism interrogates “not just liberal humanism’s assertion of the real but the apocalyptic murder of the real” (229). Especially within the realm of the real, postmodernism negates the totalizing system of understanding reality. Hitherto models of reality no longer become instrumental and relevant. Rather, reality in the postmodernist stance becomes a subjective phenomenon that remains questionable and continues to be a contested form of knowledge. Bearing in mind the subjective nature of postmodernist stance towards reality, *The Velveteen Rabbit* at length denotes the possibility for the existence of pluralistic reality and truth.

A majority of the readers may interpret *The Velveteen Rabbit* within the category of children’s literature that situates love which bears a transformative effect on the characters. The novel makes the readers plunge into it to get immersed in the velveteen rabbit who is at the initial stage naturally shy and is snubbed by the expensive toys since he is made only of velveteen. Therefore, the plight of the velveteen rabbit is at stake when his presence is not acknowledged. Complexities arise when the notion of the real becomes unstable and personal. The notion of reality becomes a contested term that has been defined, interpreted and is an on-going process that is still continuously debated. *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922), a novel that has been selected for the study situates reality at the core of the narrative. In the story, what bewilders the readers is the manner in which the



real is constituted, framed and understood. Unlike the conventional understanding of reality, the novel puts forward a newer understanding of reality which is indeed controversial. Grounding the real and attempting to make one's existence real become the sole purpose of the velveteen rabbit. The mechanical toys feel superior and look down upon other toys and have always "pretended they were real" (Bianco 12). For the real to exist, the counterpart or the other is considered as supreme importance "The rabbit could not claim to be a model of anything, for he didn't know that real rabbits existed" (12). Therefore, to imbibe a sense of real the existence of the other is made essential. To the question put forward by the rabbit "what is real" (13) the Skin Horse replies "Real isn't how you are made...It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real" (14). With this statement, it becomes discernible that the narrative treats human emotion as the real. Whether it is the passionate, appealing emotions or the unappealing emotion of hatred both of them are treated to represent the real. While treating human emotions as one of the aspects of reality, the narrative deteriorates the objective version of reality. An incisive remark of the Skin Horse demonstrates the subjective nature of reality when he says "once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand" (14). In this context, the real is treated as a personal matter, which is inclusively dependent on the interpretation and perception of the individual.

Within the ambit of the narration, the plot deviates from a linear structural form of representing the characters. The descriptions of the characters soon lose their coherence when characters are made to inherit chameleonic traits. The boy can be a loving, compassionate character, careless, absent-minded to the point where he loses his vigilance. Nana, who rules the nursery, is a person who does not seem to have consistency, as the narrator remarks, "Sometimes she took no notice of the playthings lying about, and sometimes, for no reason whatever, she went swooping about like a great wind and hustled them away in cupboards" (15). Complications regarding the real arise that has escalated the betwixt condition of the characters. Propelled by these inconsistencies none of the characters are bound to exhibit the real and the scope to locate the real vanish gradually. The teasing opening sentence of the novel "THERE WAS ONCE A VELVETEEN RABBIT" (11) denotes that the here and now cannot be coherent as we know. Such vagueness deliberated at the beginning of the novel subsequently connotes that the velveteen rabbit leaves behind the tangible world of everyday reality. "Real thread whisker" (11) and the coat that is "spotted brown and white" (11), "the velveteen rabbit was forgotten" (12) "he was fat and bunched, as a real rabbit should be" (11) have suggested that the narrative has something to reveal.

Central to the plot of the narrative is the manner in which memory is distorted. Memory which is deemed to be the defining characteristic of the real is suppressed and subjugated which makes the presence of the real stagnant and void. On Christmas morning, the attractiveness of the velveteen rabbit lasts only for a short moment when he is acclaimed "quite the best of all" (11) among the "nuts and oranges and a toy engine, and chocolate almonds and a clockwork mouse" (11). Soon the narrative reverses itself when the narrator says he is loved by the boy "for at least two hours" (12) which is followed by a rustling sound of tissue paper. The excitement in unwrapping and looking at the Christmas presents shatters the velveteen rabbit's presence, hence "for a long time he lived in the toy cupboard or on the nursery floor, and no one thought very much about him. He



was naturally shy, and being only made of velveteen” (12). Harboring to make himself real, there are times when the rabbit contests with the memory of the human characters. Within the narrative, there is an inability in the boy’s memory to acknowledge the velveteen rabbit especially towards the climax of the novel “but he never knew that it really was his own bunny” (33). Memory fails in discerning the real and fails to portray the real, the definite, the meaningful as well as the acceptable. Alongside the inconsistency of memory, the shortcoming of memory is visibly portrayed in the scene when the rabbit is left behind on the lawn by the boy. Moreover, out of sheer excitement to go to the seaside the boy’s memory could no longer accommodate the velveteen rabbit. While the boy is asleep, dreaming of the seaside, the velveteen rabbit lays among the old picture books in the corner behind the fowl house, and he feels very lonely. The boy’s inability to be concerned about the welfare of the velveteen rabbit is a betrayal that further denotes the limitations of memory. Therefore, the idea to see the big waves, the sandcastle and the tiny crabs in the seaside soon diminishes when memory could no longer be sustained. Likewise, an abandonment of the rabbit that necessitates him to be burnt since he is accused of “a mass of scarlet fever germs” (27) reveals the selective nature of memory. Memory in the narrative could no longer be deemed as real solely because of its transitory nature. According to the Skin Horse, the process of being real “doesn’t happen all at once... You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept” (14). Constituted by memory’s fragility, temporariness and unreliability the statement makes it apparent that the real can exist independent of one’s memory. Moreover, the real cannot randomly occur upon the reliance on one’s memory. The inability of the real to occur for those who “break easily” further signifies the impossibility to come to terms with the definite concept of the real. Caught in the betwixt position, the rabbit at one instance loses his memory. In the midst of being burdened with the fear that the other rabbit will learn about his hind legs, the velveteen rabbit departs from his memory when “he did not know that when the Fairy kissed him that last time she had changed him altogether” (32). Therefore, the incompatibility of one’s memory especially in the establishment of identity becomes noticeable once again. An extensive variation regarding the nature of reality is validated when memory could no longer retain what it has already stored and specifically when it abides with little or no relation with the past.

An important aspect of the real is made visible when the emotions of the characters are treated to bear life on its own. The provocative statement “You were Real to the boy...because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to everyone” (30-31) underlines and demonstrates emotion and the abstract as alternative realities that exhibit the power to form the identity of the velveteen rabbit. A single act of love disseminates a collective love that merges the able and the unable making both the subjects functional beings. Love reminds both the velveteen rabbit and the boy of their vulnerability, thereby shaping them to be both matter and bodies and it puts them in a liminal condition. It is crucial to note that love humanized the rabbit and is not disgruntled. Rather, one understands that categories such as the normal and the abnormal, the real and the unreal are constructed which becomes the consequence of discourse. The ability to love depicts how identity is being constructed whereby a route to evolution takes different networks. Differing from the postmodernist stance on the self, an inherent modernist idea of the self is arbitrary and problematic because the individual is:



An autonomous, fully self-aware individual who forges relations with others based on rational calculations of utility...The modernist myth of the self is, thus, not only false but oppressive, because it denies the emotional reality of the self and the full scope of our connections to others. (Schwalbe 345)

The bodily function or the emotion of the velveteen rabbit stands as another level of understanding reality. A strange incident has happened in the narrative when tears trickle down from the velveteen rabbit's nose to the ground, "for where the tears had fallen a flower grew out of the ground, a mysterious flower, not at all like that grew in the garden" (Bianco 29). When emotion nurtures life, the oppressive structure of the real is subverted thus the selfhood of the velveteen rabbit no longer aligns with a model of archetypal rabbit since "reality is a lot more than a text; it is comprised of things and events bound together into a semi-ordered semi-chaotic whole by our emotions, beliefs, and deeds" (Shalin 316). Tears and love, the two forms of emotions have been escalated to an extensive form of the real. Viewing from this angle, the self becomes identifiable that nurtures the velveteen rabbit to navigate along with the fabric of everyday life without losing himself in the process. Therefore, emotions bear transformative power that provides a channel for the velveteen rabbit to acquire subjectivity and amend his identity.

Within the narrative of the novel, the most contested and debated term is the issue of the real. The velveteen rabbit, the main protagonist of the novel desperately attempts to make a judgment of the signs and traits proliferating around him, but he is unable to meet his quest. Bonded by love, friendship and compassion emotions retain the velveteen rabbit to become real in the novel. With the passage of time, the narrator says that the velveteen rabbit lost his shape and barely looks like a rabbit anymore. One also notices that the velveteen rabbit's world and reality are fractured into pieces that even the boy is not sure whether it is him or merely his imagination when he asks "why, he looks like my old Bunny that was lost when I had scarlet fever!" (Bianco 33) To acclaim himself and to retain his identity as a rabbit there is a need to conform to certain structural references. Failing to exhibit those structured features, the velveteen rabbit's position is at stake and looks real only to the boy especially after losing his shape. The arbitrariness between the signifier and the signified can further be seen when the flurry rabbit interrogates him with dreadful questions whether he can jump on his hind legs to prove himself as a real rabbit. With the progression of the narrative, the arbitrariness of signs including the signifier and signified dichotomy is heightened when the velveteen rabbit is accused as unreal since "He doesn't smell right! ... He isn't a rabbit at all! He isn't real" (22). Shape, smell, and the hind legs stand as testing grounds, a form of reference to define the real while functioning as objective referential modes. The other rabbit thinks that signs can proliferate meaning that can bequeath reality. Besides, the other rabbit thinks that he is real because he can act according to the pre-assigned habits. A model of a rabbit artificially imposed upon the velveteen rabbit depicts the incoherency of reality and the subjective nature of reality is certified by the Skin Horse who claims "Real isn't how you are made" (14). This statement points to the complex nature of reality that can encompass multiple meanings. Love in the narrative propagates simulation that has replaced the constructed real. Therefore, the structured defining features of rabbits only function as structural equivalents when love makes the velveteen rabbit real and it subsequently assists him to attain a hyperreal identity. Within the realm of the hyperreal, signs do not exhibit any meaning and do not possess any structural equivalents and it is no longer possible to make



reference because “it no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance...it is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard 2). The hyperreal in the narrative eliminates the structured traits of a rabbit such as smell, shape and other structural defining characteristics. These structural characteristics become only a map of reality that cannot be comprehended in totality. It is the rejection of the equivalent that makes the velveteen rabbit’s hyperreal identity more visible since signs no longer define his identity. Thereby being loved unconditionally without stable standards, the knowable is subverted and the objective system of reality is obscured. Biological knowledge including dominant ideas and how a rabbit is expected to behave and act no longer has any significance. The velveteen rabbit boldly claims himself as real although he might lack structured characteristics of rabbit because he has already entered the realm of the hyperreal which does not necessitate any kind of outside reference. Society’s adherence to the model of reality is intensified when the velveteen rabbit refuses to dance with the wild rabbits since “he was made all in one piece” (Bianco 31). His attempt to behave like the wild rabbit fails considerably since he is not the reference, sign, copy or structure. His inability to act perfectly and assimilate with the other rabbits, and failing to display the essence of the real makes him enter a process of simulation since “simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard1). Nana’s prophetic remarks, “I declare if that old Bunny hasn’t got quite a knowing expression!” (Bianco 18) denotes the hyperreal identity of the velveteen rabbit. Especially after the velveteen rabbit attains his hyperreal identity he does not lose anything. Most importantly, within the realm of the hyperreal, the impossible is restored and the qualities that are likely to define the velveteen rabbit before the advent of hyperreality no longer has inherent worth. Signifying concepts such as shape, size and smell of the velveteen rabbit function as a secondary form of representation and is subsequently defeated when he utters “come back and play with me!...I *know* I am Real” (22). Likeness and originality no longer possess the real that makes the velveteen rabbit attain a vital state of the hyperreal in which references are merely deemed as malleable signs.

Self-reflexivity which constitutes an important part of the self acquires significance with the supernatural. Much loaded debate rests on the character of the Fairy who transforms the velveteen rabbit into real. Being “the loveliest fairy in the whole world” (30) and possessing a face akin to the most perfect flower, she entices the velveteen rabbit with her appearance. Alongside her astounding remarkable features what becomes intriguing is her ability to create the real as she states “I take care of all the playthings that the children have loved. When they are old and worn out and the children don’t need them anymore, then I come and take them away with me and turn them into real” (30). One of the stages in which the velveteen rabbit attains the state of the real is through the aid of fantasy. In whatever mode it is represented fantasy’s immense role proves pivotal because it acts as an alternative mode of reality while diminishing the illogicality of objective reality. Rosemary Jackson claims:

Fantasy expresses a longing for an absolute meaning, for something other than the limited ‘known’ world. Yet whereas ‘faery stories and quasi-religious tales functions through nostalgia for the sacred, the modern fantastic refuses a backward-looking glance. It is an inverted form of myth. It focuses upon the



unknown within the present, discovering emptiness inside an apparently full reality. (158)

Magic reverses the narrative and the toy characters when the magic Fairy nurtures life and makes the worn out toys attain life. So the universal appeal magic contributes to the characters through the Fairy cut across the dichotomy of good and bad, mechanical and stuffed toys, wooden and metal toys etc. This makes a tie that magic possesses power much stronger than the human characters. Besides, magic that lies beyond the reach of human knowledge and perception is elevated as the real. Far from being imaginary, magic to a considerable extent generates reality regardless of its consequence. One can see the role of magic in fashioning the saturated self. Assurance through magic both at the level of the conscious and unconscious level irrespective of how the velveteen rabbit is made makes him transcend the degraded self despite several insurmountable obstacles. The transformed rabbit with the aid of magic arranges his real self at a broader level. After the grandiose wish has been satisfied by the Fairy, the velveteen rabbit becomes more peaceful with his body. Readers no longer encounter the earthly beauty of the rabbit since they are made to witness the inconceivable, impossible, unseen and unheard. The final transformed figure of the rabbit is described when “he found that he actually has hind legs! Instead of dingy velveteen he had brown fur, soft and shiny, his ears twitched by themselves, and his whiskers were so long that they brushed the grass” (Bianco 32). Fantasy’s therapeutic function as well as its role in disseminating what lies beyond the apparent can be validated in the narrative. In emphasizing the role of emotion, the Fairy states to the velveteen rabbit that he is real to the boy because he loves him. Fantasy’s emotional transformative effect erases the emotional dilemmas that make the velveteen rabbit re-evaluate his personal and emotional subjectivity.

The Velveteen Rabbit might appear to be an odd choice in the context of posthumanism that muses the linkages between humans and non-humans in the form of toys. Speaking toys that become the central characters in the novel bear traits and characteristics of human beings which depict the fluidity of human and non-human relations. They blur the boundary between humans and machines while calling attention to how human beings enmesh with other forms. This approach necessarily separates the binary structured reality between human beings and non-human characters. Therefore, the narrative adheres to posthumanism because it redefines the gap and discrimination of hierarchies between humans and non-humans. Pramod Nayar states that Critical posthumanism “rejects the very idea of anything innate to the human, arguing instead for a messy congeries of qualities developed over centuries through the human interactions with the environment (which includes non-organic tools and organic life” (11). Toys varying from the china dog that always sleeps with the boy, the velveteen rabbit and the Skin Horse not only serve as a toy for the boy, but they also disrupt the self as an autonomous being while proposing the inter subjectivity of human beings in relation to their non-human counterparts. A vivid rejection of the self as a sovereign subject which is rather congeries is emotionally demonstrated through the gestures of the boy. Hugging the rabbit, rolling over him, pushing under the pillow, talking to him, playing games together and preparing tunnels for the rabbit under the bed cloth equally appeal both the rabbit and the boy. Both of them gain emotional satisfaction through their presence and gestures. Furthermore, the bodily connection between them that is demonstrated in the bodily gestures of the velveteen rabbit who would snuggle under the boy’s chin and the boy’s



hand clasping around him all throughout the night denotes that one's body is an accumulation of different realm that extends, expands that gradually evolve from other forms of life. On the other hand, the self/other dichotomies eventually breakdown while validating that the self is constitutive of the other making the other immersed into the self. Aside from this, the very idea of the human and the constituted notion of reality are revamped. Arguably, the linkages between man, machines and other non-human characters are revised. Thus the narrative denies the idea of the sovereign as human and the peripheral as the object and it offers how non-humans are part of human beings that function with our bodily processes. Toys in the novel function as border crossing agencies that render ethnicity, race and gender as constructed to a certain extent. The narrative shows that love, morality and friendship are not traits that exclusively pertain to human relations but are also found in human and non-human relations. The boy's dependency and satisfaction with the toys and their interrelationship further erase the emotional and intellectual division that emphasizes how humans and non-humans are not inherently different. On the other hand:

The way both the humans and the toys themselves play with, overturn or reinforce a series of "scripted" behaviors makes for potent comment on what defines "being human" or "being toy"...These posthuman playthings destabilize the gendered hierarchies that plague humanity by rendering them ridiculous. At the same time, they also play with the posthuman implications of an inhuman body built entirely for pleasure, as curiosities that can outlive their human owners but also can be variously "broken" by them. These toys thus remind us that posthumanism not only functions to upset boundaries between the human and the rest of the world...but also to expose and upset the artificial cultural binaries of humanity itself. (Jaques 214)

The second title of the novel *How Toys Become Real* manifests how the body can be reduced to possess a flexible nature which has subsequently nullified what is human. What alienates the velveteen rabbit from human beings, the rest of the other toys and other rabbit is the anxiety about not being human, being stuffed with sawdust, being impaired and being only made of velveteen. After being assured that he shall be real to everyone by the Fairy the velveteen rabbit complicates his position as an object. He has upturned human hierarchies and has troubled the confines of being. Thus, the velveteen rabbit and the other toys become the posthuman agents, who mimic and parody human forms thereby disabling the myth of universal human identity. As a toy that both mimics and parodies human form bearing several quintessential human emotions, the predestined script of the real is unravelled by the velveteen rabbit.

Crucial at the heart of *The Velveteen Rabbit* is the dismantling of a structured form of reality based upon coherence, wholeness, connectivity and pattern. Besides, the deconstruction and reconstruction of the real mark the novel's narrative shifts from modernist to the postmodernist representation of reality because "The modernist concept of single and alienated otherness is challenged by the postmodern questioning of binaries that conceal hierarchies (self/other)" (Hutcheon 61). The narrative does not attempt to stitch fragments together to produce wholeness and a sense of unity in the representation of the real. Besides, the text makes the readers encounter a critique of the desire for coherence, unity and wholeness especially in the formation of one's identity. The toys in



the novel complicate and question the boundaries of being and they propel the readers to interrogate where the real and imagined ends and begins.

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