

Magic Realism in Writings of Eminent Latin American Female Writers

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Abstract

The magic realist authors present the reader with the supernatural and extraordinary set against the backdrop of the real world. Magic realism became prominent in Latin America in the mid-20th century when the continent flourished both economically and culturally. In this research paper an attempt is being made to examine magic realism in the novels of two eminent Latin American female writers. The writing of Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel employ magic realism to depict the story of their Novels “House of Spirits” and “Like Water for Chocolate”, respectively.

“The House of the Spirits” of Isabel Allende is a prime example of Latin American magical realism. The stories of South American women and their fight against the status quo, has been depicted using good old Magic Realist techniques like the incorporation of the supernatural and the fantastic into an otherwise familiar reality. The sentences, ‘Ferula’s ghost walks into the room’, ‘Clara’s habit of moving the furniture with her mind’, ‘the Mora sisters’ ‘psychic prophecies’ and ‘Old Pedro Garcia’s talking cure for ridding Tres Marias of the plague of ants’ are the examples of magical realism in the novel.

In “Like Water for Chocolate”, Laura Esquivel has shown rigid Mexican family traditions that younger daughter of any Mexican family needs to be remain unmarried and she should take care of her mother till her last breath. Younger daughter doesn’t have right to marry or love someone. This authoritarian attitude of matriarchal society has spoiled and shattered the emotions of a young, skilled and beautiful girl Tita. The writer has presented incorporation of Cookery, love, repressed emotions and exaggeration of Tita’s sentiments through magic realism.

KEYWORDS: Latin America Boom, Magic Realism, Family Sagas, “House of Spirits”, “Like Water for Chocolate”.

INTRODUCTION

Magical Realism brings a spark of life to the imagination, which in turn excites the mind of the reader. Magical Realism is a fusion of dream and reality, a consolidation of realism and fantasy, and a form of expression that is reality based with several fantastic elements that are regarded as normal by both the readers and the characters. Magical Realism is also known for showing a different viewpoint on life and the way in which people think or act. It is the odd ball among the in crowd. Magical Realism does not use dream motifs, nor does it create false words. Magical Realism is not magic literature, as the name would seem to imply.

Anyone cannot talk about Magic Realism without talking about the Latin American Boom. That is the explosion of Latin American literature that took place primarily in

mid-20th century. During this period, a very important group of Latin American writers emerged, including Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, Laura Esquivel, Jorge Amado, Jorge Luis Borges, Isabel Allende, Julio Cortazar and Mario Vargas Llosa all of whom incorporated Magic Realist elements into their work. A lot of these writers were experimental modernists who wanted to do things in literature that had not been done before.

Magical Realism is one of the literary movements that stresses on the fantastic elements of everyday life as found in the imagined communities situated primarily in Latin America. As a result of the development of Magical Realism, women writers like Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel from Latin America became as the contributors of the recent development, focusing on women's issues and perceptions of reality in their works. The magical realistic writers mainly focus on their native land and their people. Magical Realism has some features and principles. They are using magical elements in the real life situations, Latin-American traditional way of narrations, supernatural events and history merged with magical events in the stories.

Latin American women writer have long considered themselves closer to the Amerindians than to male writers, because of their shared history of political and sexual oppression. With Isabel Allende in the forefront, they have adopted the technique of magic realism to "express the victimization of women and to show the weaknesses and injustices of male systems of government in Latin America" (BRUTON 1970: 80). In the magical world of Latin America, reality may at any moment be altered; times and places co-exist irrespective of their dates or geographical location; and spirits, in the most natural way, are illuminated, intensified and irradiated. Isabel Allende says of the magic in her writing (Zinsser 1989:9) that, "Stones are (my) only hope of harnessing 'a loud of crazy, illuminated people' Revolutions made with matches, bullets, poems and kisses.... Are written in our history." She acknowledges that anything which is part of the human mind can be written in a novel to help us "discover our true identity." Allende posits women as the sites of the Magical and ultimately, says P Gabrielle Foreman (1992:371); she allows political reality to replace Magic Realism.

Magical Realism in "The House of Spirits"

Isabel Allende was the first South American female writer to reach an audience on a global scale. She did it with the publication of her first book, *The House of Spirits*, in 1982, and since then, she has become known as one of the most important writers of Magic Realism. What sets Allende's work apart is its emphasis on women characters. She tells the stories of South American women and their fight against the status quo, using good old Magic Realist techniques like the incorporation of the supernatural and the fantastic into an otherwise familiar reality. *The House of Spirits* is regarded as one of the most prominent examples of Latin American magical realism. In the novel, magical realism is characterized by the simple, straightforward presentation of strange, magical events. For example, characteristics such as Clara's clairvoyance are compared to her brother's lameness. The characters in magical realist fiction experience and accept the unbelievable with tranquil wisdom. When Clara dreams that her mother's severed head is missing, for example, she borrows a car and goes to find it, and then she puts it in a hatbox and forgets about it. Magical realist novels are often long family sagas, told with little respect for clear chronological series. They often employ strategies of revelation and repetition which are rampant in *The House of the*

Spirits, especially in Clara's predictions of future events and in their recurrence of the names Pedro and Esteban.

Other elements of magical realism that can be found in *The House of the Spirits* are: Rosa and Alba's algae green hair, on pg. 111 when Pedro Garcia cures the plague of ants by showing a few their way out of Tres Marias in a handkerchief, "I'm going to show you the way out, ants, so you get out of here and take the rest of them with you." Also, Clara and the Mora Sisters' predictions, the three-legged table that they use to contact spirits and Clara's habit of floating around in a chair are all elements of magical realism in this novel.

Clara, whose spirit and presence dominate Allende's novel, had already foreseen the proposal even before Trueba's arrival. Her clairvoyance is accompanied by other gifts—she can move objects without touching them, commune with the dead and extra-terrestrials, and float her chair across the floor with no apparent source of motion. She is incapable of matching the love of her mercurial husband, whose passion for Clara rises in proportion to her distraction and emotional distance. But she provides a powerful, countervailing presence in this patriarchal household, and inspires by example the next two generations of women led by her daughter Blanca and granddaughter Alba.

Clara personifies the ultimate power of testimony through her creative use of memory, and it is her journals which subsequently enable Alba, her granddaughter, to transcend ignorance and repression and to enter the world of freedom through the liberating powers of being a woman. For periods in her life Clara lives in silence in her own self-created magical space in which she communes with spirits, practises clairvoyance, ignores the chronology of history in her journal writings and predicts a bright and beautiful future for her family, her home and her country. Refusing to conform in either dress or behaviour to the norm, she is an individual who defies society's violence and hypocrisy and who continually affirms and reaffirms, in her own space and world, her own values and beliefs. Her architectural machinations turn the mansion she lives in after her marriage into "an enchanted labyrinth... of twisted staircases that led to empty spaces, of turrets, of small windows that could not be opened" (115), and into a "magic universe" (322). While the 'unopened windows' may seem contradictory to the essence of feminism, suggesting a closing off of life instead of opening oneself to new experiences, they need to be seen as manifestations of the magical, through which the spirit passes, rather than feminist or political, for through this magic Allende allows Clara to celebrate the forces of life and the healing power of the spirit.

Although there is obvious female strength in Clara's character, Allende portrays also elements of the healer-cum-nurturer and a measure of passivity, which precludes her from initiating any positive action for a change. It is thus evident, at times, that Allende uses Clara almost as a stereotypical image that recognises how 'sacred' the female is, and how complex, rich and nurturing the power of passive female energy is. While feminism generally condemns and avoids the use of stereotypes as a male construct, Allende's portrayal of Clara strengthens the sense of an ever developing feminist proclivity through the novel.

Magical Realism in “Like Water for Chocolate”

Like Water for Chocolate written by Laura Esquivel is a full blown Latin American magic realism novel which incorporates fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction. Esquivel's novel follows the tradition of magical realism in its purest form and creates a welcome entry into the Latin American canon. The novel represents many cultural aspects of the Mexican cultural life style throughout the entire novel using everything from small cultural references to large references. She creates a unique take on books by combining a cook book with a novel. Through the use of delicious recipes to further the story line, it creates a special way of telling a story that leaves readers both hungry and emotional. Each chapter has its own recipe, usually a traditional but nonetheless exquisite recipe that reflects the specific nature of the chapter. Each recipe combines general themes throughout the book such as passion, heat, fire, desires, emotions etc.

From the very first page of the novel, it is clear that the real world in which her characters inhabit shall be greatly exaggerated. When Esquivel's narrator describes Tita as being so sensitive to onions that “when she was still in my great-grandmother's belly her sobs were so loud that even Nacha, the cook, who was half deaf, could hear them easily.” Tita cries so much at birth that when her tears have dried, “Nacha swept up the residue the tears had left on the red stone floor. There was enough salt to fill a ten-pound sack—it was used for cooking and lasted a long time.” Tita’s recipes always give unexpected effects, for example, “After eating Tita's quail in rose petal sauce, Tita's sister, Gertrudis, erupted with an immense amount of heat. She was overwhelmed by lust and desire, and ran to shower, but her body heat exploded the shower. This exaggerated scene shows the enormous amount of heat given off by her body because of her emotions.”

Tita's emotions manifest in anyone who enjoys her meals: Tita's tears in the tamale mix result in everyone's becoming violently ill at Pedro and Rosaura's wedding. A world in which the tears of the cook send the wedding guests eating her food in to grief and a woman so aflame with passion she sets fire to the shower. Food is at the heart of the book, not only does each chapter include a recipe, but the preparation of food and its consumption is magically linked to the heroine's sensuality.

Laura Esquivel has depicted rigid Mexican family traditions that younger daughter of any Mexican family needs to be remain unmarried and she should take care of her mother till her last breath. Younger daughter doesn't have right to marry or love someone. This authoritarian attitude of matriarchal society has spoiled and shattered the emotions of a young, skilled and beautiful girl Tita. Tita was in love with Pedro but unfortunately because of Mexican tradition Pedro marries Tita’s Elder sister Rosaura as he can be at least able to see Tita. After a long period of 22 years Mama Elena dies, somehow Tita got rid from the heinous Mexican tradition, although Mama Elena died, she returned to haunt Tita like never before. She used fear to threaten Tita to make sure she did not step out of line again and let her know that even though she was dead, she would always be watching her. 'I hate you, I've always hated you!' Tita had said the magic words that would make her disappear forever. The imposing figure of her mother began to shrink until it became no more than a tiny light. As the ghost faded away, a sense of relief grew inside Tita's body" (Esquivel 199). Esquivel uses this scene to complicate the plot and returns the conflict with Mama Elena and Tita once again.

After longing of twenty-two years, Pedro and Tita united, "At that moment the fiery bodies of Pedro and Tita began to throw off glowing sparks. They set on fire the bedspread, which ignited the entire ranch. The animals had fled just in time to save themselves from the inferno! The dark room was transformed into an erupting volcano. It cast stone and ash in every direction. When the stones reached high enough, they exploded into multi-coloured lights. From miles away, people in neighbouring towns watched the spectacle, thinking it was fireworks..." (Esquivel 245).

Like Water for Chocolate is an amazing story that conveys powerful emotions throughout the entire novel. Laura Esquivel skilfully weaves magical realism within the story to reveal the emotional obstacles Tita encounters. She faces magical events dealing with food, ghosts, and fire and even though we may not experience these mystically occurrences in our day to day life, it does not mean that we do not face the same obstacles or have the same emotions as Tita.

Conclusion

Magic realism is a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world: dreams, legends, myths, emotion, passion, history. In *House of Spirits*, Isabel Allende uses Clara's prophecy to apprise her audience of the political situation in Chile's revolutionary world. Through Clara (and later Blanca and Alba) she predicts the future and simultaneously illustrates a world in which female solidarity and unity, acting in ways distinctive and representative of this kind of affiliation in the real world, are able to mould a more beautiful, equitable and conscionable future than the one existing or pre-ordained. She uses Magic to nurture and cure the souls. Even she gives message to the society that woman has broad sense to solve mankind's problem. Eventually she assures the reader that instinct or magical power is woman's cup of tea than a man. This magic, Allende assures us, exists overtly only in the earlier passive generations of women so devoid of education and economic and social freedom that they compensate for their lack of real power by indirect manipulations and pretended intuitions.

In the Novel *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel's story flows with the Magic Realism and it sticks us to reality with the touch of magic although we don't feel it extraordinary with circumstances. Laura gives voice to rigid Mexican tradition that younger daughter of any family cannot marry or love someone as she has to take care of her mother till her last breath. Laura connects to common woman by correlating her chapters and incidences with exquisite recipes, desires, emotions and patriarchal authority.

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