

# Magical Feminism: The Female Voices of Magic Realism in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*

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**Abstract**— *Magic realism is a distinct subgenre of writing that works on the mechanism of paradoxes of placing two opposites together to make a rich and complex meaning – the fusion of real and fantastic as Angel Flores calls it ‘amalgamation of realism and fantasy’. Magic Realism can also be read as a Postcolonial weapon as it fights back the traditional tendencies and the staunch realism of western literature. Female voices have also employed magic realism to say aloud the problems of women across the globe. Magic Realism has thrived well in the hands of women writers across cultures and continents. Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, Laura Esquivel, Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee, Arundhati Roy, Sarah Addison Allen, Yaa Gyasi, Raja Alem etc. This paper proposes to bring into limelight the Latin American Women Writers who are often left out to be mentioned along the list of men Latin American writers.*

**Keywords**— *magic realism, women writer, Latin women writers, themes, food, feminism, cooking, postcolonial, subaltern.*

Just as realism was a response to romanticism, magical realism was a reaction to realism. Latin American novel, with its overt keenness for its experimental verve and an explicit preoccupation with form and style has got a rightful place in World Literature. Though, Latin American literature was once considered as the backwaters of the West, now, it has become the mainstream literature is no ordinary thing. Magical realism became popularly known during the Boom Period of 1962-1967 when Latin American literature started flourishing internationally. Latin America was undergoing a period of political turmoil during the 1960s and 70s because of political schemes created by the Cold War. This brought a unity among the writers of this region based on a common plea for nationalization. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the eyes of the world turned to Latin America. It was with the use of magic realism that the Latin American writers were celebrated and their novels reached the heights of popularity within this time period.

Ever since, many writers across the globe have started using magical realism in their writings, but the most popular alluring works of this genre continues to be from Latin American boom. With the advent of the boom of

magic realism, which the Latin American claim to be their own, when the westerners term it a postcolonial voice, French Surrealism, the Latin American writers call it their own and Though many non-Latin American writers have attempted at using magical realism in their works, Latin Americans, claim this movement as the original, the origin, the home and the only true birthplace of magic realism. As magic realism was propagated from the pulpit of colonized countries, Western philosophers try to group magic realists as postmodernist writers, and many other writers categorize them both as postmodernists and magic realists. But the foundational literary identity of Latin America hinges on magic realism exclusively. With all these arguments, magic realism can be at once, philosophical, cultural, historical and political. It is also religious in its strain as it is grounded on Catholic faith of believing in miracles. A critic, Bowers points out the variety of themes of Magic Realism thus:

What unites these writes is the political nature of the magical realism ... whether from an overtly anti-imperial, feminist or Marxist approach, or a mixture of all of these, or whether the form reveals its political aspect more covertly through the cultural politics of post colonialism, cross-

culturalism, or the friction between the writing of pragmatic European Western culture and oral, mythic based cultures. What locates these writers politically is their narrative position outside the dominant power structures and cultural centres (48)

Many debates centre on whether a given work should be recognized as magical realism or really fantastical, thereby should the work be called literature as opposed to entertainment. But, magic realism has been given a lofty status of literary fiction instead of calling it fantastical or commercial or a genre fiction making it more reputable in the academic landscape, and more likely to win awards. Unlike in fantasy novels, authors in the magical realism genre deliberately withhold information about the magic in their created world in order to present the magical events as ordinary occurrences, and to present the incredible as normal, every-day life. Magic Realism purports to be more real than reality itself.

Women writers such as Isabel Allende from Chile and Laura Esquivel from Mexico have become part of this movement's later developments, contributing a focus on women's issues and perceptions of reality. Laura Esquivel, along with Isabel Allende, is one of the female forerunners of the post-boom literary movement in Latin America.

Isabel Angelica Allende was born on August 2, 1942, in Lima, Peru, the daughter of a Chilean diplomat and the cousin of the Chilean president Salvador Allende, who was assassinated in 1973 as part of a military coup. This event heavily influenced Allende that she has made use of this in her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, published in 1982, which has won a number of international awards in Mexico, Germany, France, and Belgium.

Laura Esquivel, when attempted to write this magic realist novel, it was a new niche in the literary front in the early 1990. It marked the rise of the female versions of magical realism, the type of narrative style popularized by male writers like Gabriel García Márquez, and which rendered depictions of everyday life suddenly uncanny and fantastical through the intervention of supernatural elements that did not faze the inhabitants of such fictional small towns.

Women novelists like Chile's Isabel Allende finally captured the global limelight, putting their own feminine and feminist spin on these tales of enhanced reality by suggesting that those tasks we traditionally read as part of "women's work" may not be quite as banal as they may appear at first glance. Among this group of writers, Laura Esquivel, author of *Like Water for Chocolate*, achieved cross-over success by emphasizing the inherent magic in

vernacular knowledge—such as kitchen lore—which had been disdained by women of means as well as the rising number of women now employed outside the home who were turning to prepared or fast food to feed their families rather than spend hours in the kitchen after a busy day at work. By using her fiction to conjure visions of an earlier time - the Mexican Revolution (1910-20) - when the modern nation was taking shape and women still possessed the traditional culinary secrets passed down the generations, Esquivel suggests that even those subject to unfair and sexist rules can exercise some measure of power by wielding the tools available to them, in this case, the kitchen, to achieve their own ends.

The Magical elements that are present in these two novels are discussed in this paper. The notable magical elements in *The House of Spirits* by Isabel Allende is the character Clara the Clairvoyant possessed supernatural qualities. She was one who could interpret dreams. It was an inherent nature in her that she could foretell the occurrence of earthquakes. The writer remarks that her unusual qualities are never considered as hindrance at home.

The child's mental powers bothered no one and produced no great disorder; they almost always surfaced...within the strict confines of their home. It was true there had been times, just as they were about to sit down to dinner...when the saltcellar would suddenly begin to shake and move among the plates and goblets (7)

As Clara grew up, she became more experienced and her ability became a part of her everyday affair. In a moment of an exalted state, she went into a condition of trance when she would move around the room sitting in her chair.

In Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, Esquivel relates the story of the protagonist, Tita's, birth. The book remarks how she is very talented in the kitchen, and in fact was born in the kitchen. However she is very sensitive to onions. So much so that while she was still in utero and her pregnant mother was chopping onions, the baby's eyes began to water. And water, and water. "Tita was literally washed into this world on a great tide of tears that spilled over the edge of the table and flooded across the kitchen floor". After the house eventually dried out, the housekeeper swept up the salt from the tears— enough to fill a 10 pound sack. When Nacha, the indigenous cook at her home, who was more loving towards her than her biological mother, dies, Tita felt completely depressed. But very soon she finds that she is able to communicate with Nacha. "All at once she seemed to hear Nacha's voice

dictating a recipe, a prehispanic recipe. . . . So skilful was she that it seemed Nacha herself was in Tita's body doing all those things" (46 -47)

Thus these novels present the intervention of the supernatural ghosts in the physical world's setting. The abilities of Clara to interpret dreams and Tita to converse with the ghosts are very essential to the plot. The interaction between spirits and humans, as well extraordinary phenomena are presented in the text in a coherent way, and all magic events are perceived by characters and readers as it were absolutely natural.

The term „magical feminism“ was coined by Patricia Hart in 1987 with purpose to describe Isabel Allende's narrative. "I define „magical feminism“ as magical realism employed in a femino-centric work." (Hart 30).

The narrative that runs through these two novels taken for study are overtly female. All the character who are portrayed to possess extraordinary qualities like communicating with ghosts, who practice magic, who can convert an emotional condition to a physical condition, and who are ghosts themselves – are all women. To substantiate this idea more specific instances of supernatural events connected with women are shown.

In *The House of Spirits*, Clara, a female character could predict the sex of the children who were yet to be born. ' . . . I hope this time it will be a boy so we can give him my name . . . It's not one, it's two' (115).

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Tita was able to quiet her hungry new-born nephew by feeding him even while she was a virgin. 'She saw the boy's face slowly grow peaceful and when she heard the way he was swallowing. . . , she removed the boy from her breast: a thin stream of milk sprayed out'.(70)

These instances from these two novels show not only how magic realism is used by these women but also utilize these supernatural happenings to express a specific women's experience which make them magical feminists.

The two novels taken for study can be studied under the light of femino-centric texts, which Elaine Showalter terms as 'gynocriticism'. The thematic study of these novels concentrates on women and the female experience and it can be rightly called as feminist criticism. Some parallels can be drawn between feminist approach and magic realism.

There are some parallels between the feminist approach and magical realism. First, the feminist criticism, in all its many and various manifestations, attempts to free itself from naturalized patriarchal notions (Selden at al 115); at the same time, magical realism also participates in the process of "patriarchal culture's disenchantment with itself" (Faris 4). Second, as critics indicate, the characteristic of magical

realism is its transgressive and subversive qualities (Bowers 67), that remind us, to some extent, the characteristics of a style of writing described as l'écriture feminine. L'écriture feminine is the practice associated with French feminism and a discourse concerned with subjectivity, sexuality and language (LeBian 134); and women had an interest in writing it because of its subversive qualities which could counter their oppression (Liladhar 378).

Since we deal with novels written by female authors, it is worth to remember another feminist critical practice, gynocriticism. This term was coined by Elaine Showalter and this kind of practice studies women's writing with the aim of tracing a specifically female literary tradition. To some extent, this practice could be applied to the Esquivel's novel. As Taylor points out, the novel evokes a genre that is traditionally coded as feminine: the novella por entregas which means, a work of fiction usually published in instalments in magazines (184). The other principal popular form which is reworked in the novel is that of the recipe. Each chapter begins with a list of ingredients and „manera de hacerse“(185).

In reference to Allende's novel and l'écriture feminine, Swanson indicates, that this narrative does not in any real sense seek to re-create a supposedly 'feminine language', but it does in some ways offers a feminine discourse against a masculine one (162). In similar vein is the opinion of Faris: "while works by women authors such Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison, Laura Esquivel, [and others], have used magical realism in novels that are centred on women's experience and women's problems, there is no single definable feminist ideology that joins them" (172).

The two novels that are taken for study could be read as postcolonial discourse. There can be many characters who stand against the dominant power structures. As magic realism has parallel terms with feminist criticism, it has also got associations with postcolonial criticism. When Slemmon proposed the theory that engaged magical realism in postcolonial discourse, he explained that "in the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place" (409) and this structure reflects the tension between opposed discourses of colonized and colonists (410).

Critics often link postcolonial perspectives of magical realism with two postcolonial critics: Gayathri Chakravorthy and Homi Bhabha. The two postcolonial critics who link postcolonial perspectives and magic realism are Gayathri Chakravorthy Spivak and Homi. K. Bhabha. 'Can a Subaltern Speak' is the famous postcolonial essay, where Gayathri Spivak formulates postcolonial theories for the study of subaltern voices. Very truly, magic realism can also be partially viewed as representation of subaltern voices.

Homi. K. Bhabha's idea that after the Latin American Boom, magic realism has become the literary language of the postcolonial world has added importance to magic realism.

Esquivel's novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, though it does not concern much about postcolonial issues, mention is made about the Kikapu Indian woman, whom Doctor Brown's grandfather had married. She was never acknowledged as a legal wife and continuously treated disrespectfully. The Yankee family addressed her always as 'the Kikapu' rather than using her original name. 'For the Browns, the word Kikapu summed up everything that was most disagreeable in the world.'(101)

In Allende's novel, representations of postcolonial voices in the form of class struggles and the suppressed voices who were the victims of political repression are explicit. Senator Esteban Trueba had an obsession to destroy what he call the 'marxist cancer' but when the political police came for Alba, he could not do anything and his granddaughter entered into the nightmare.

This paper has attempted to study the characteristics of magic realism manifested in the two novels *The House of the Spirits* and *Like Water for Chocolate* by the most poignant Latin American women writers, Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel respectively. Convincingly, the two novels demonstrate all the characteristics of magic realism and have established the definition of magic realism. This paper has also navigated the peculiarities of these writers in the usage of magic realism distinctly to arrive at the desired result. the novels as sharing feminine experience . The two women writers have employed magic realism to focus female characters and a specific female experience.

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