

Feministic Study of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* Through the Lens of Magic Realism

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Abstract

The phrase 'Magic realism' has two contradictory aspects, the word, magic refers to something that is full of mystery, unknown and unfamiliar, but on the other hand, realism connotes that is the reality, known and familiar. So, both the words are contradictory in nature and sense. The origin of the term in literature can be traced back to Latin America. It was because of the frequent visits of the writers to different cultural hubs like Berlin and Paris where the movement in art was the main source of inspiration for cultivating the trait of this genre. This genre flourished in the hands of a number of female authors across different cultures and civilizations in which Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Toni Morrison, Sarah Addision and Isabel Allende are worthy of detailed consideration. Isabel Allende has used this genre in the feministic sense.

Keywords: feminism, magic realism, fantasy, environment, character.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that the term 'magic realism' which is also referred to as 'magical realism' or 'marvelous realism' is a style or genre in English literature that explores powerfully the realistic view of the modern world with the magical elements associated with it. In other words, it can be alleged that magic realism is a recurrent term in Literature that has been particularly associated with the magical aspects or the supernatural phenomenon delineated in mundane setting of a work in general, and dramas and novels in particular. The term magical realism is entirely different from fantasy, whereas in magic realism, there is presence of realistic elements and the magical elements are introduced to make a point about reality, on the other hand, fantasy is devoid of realistic elements. Magic realism is a comprehensive term in which there is fusion of realistic and magical elements that produce all inclusive pictures before the readers.

Without any Shadow of doubt, the term magical realism connotes description rather than critically rigorous as the critic, Matthew Strecher puts it as: "what happens when a highly detailed realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe."(267) The term, magical realism has been hotly debated and discussed in the arena of English literature by various critics as per their mood, taste, temperament and angle of perception. There is perplexity produced by

the term as one finds a number of authors to be called themselves as magic realists. This term made its debut in German literature where some critics like Franz Roh believes that the term magic realism was used to denote new objectivity which was considered as an alternate to the term expressionism propounded by a German museum director, Gustav Hartlaub.

Roh identified magic realism's details smooth, photography clarity and the portrayal of the magical nature of rational world that reflected the uncanniness of people and our modern technological environment. Maria Luisa Bombal's novels are held as an embodiment of this technique, but there was also a differentiation between genre and surrealism.

Italian writer, Massimo Bontempalli, who was profoundly influenced by German magic-realist painting is generally known as the first to use the concept of magic realism in his works to portray the fantastic and mysterious nature of reality. Roh's magic realism left an indelible impact on the writers in Hispanic America.

During the 1940s and 1950s, various writers including Ivan Albright, Petre Blume Gray and George Tooker, described magic realism as uncanny realism. Quite contrary to literature, the magic realist art does not generally combine fantastic or magical content, but it looks at the mundane aspects through hyper-realistic and mysterious lens.

Among the most important and significant features of magical realism, we have a long list of its features. It is a well-known fact that every text is different and possesses modicum features. The first and the foremost is the presence of fantastical elements which enable the enable and help to enclose modern political realities that can be fallacious. In magic realism, one comes across the presence of fantastic elements in the real world. There is a fusion of super naturalism with the natural traits of the world. One of the significant features of magical realism is that the narrator in the story is unfamiliar, but the story continue with logical arguments and acquires accuracy as if nothing extraordinary had taken place. Magical incidents are described as the normal happening, therefore the readers find marvelous as normal and common.

During the period of 1962-1967 when Latin American literature was emerging to its fullest, political conflict dominated the literary scene during 1960s and 1970s as there were political schemes created by the Cold War. Different writers of the time were closely associated with each other harmoniously on the basis of nationalistic feelings. It was during this phase that after the Cuban Revolution, the technique of magic realism gained immense popularity and significance among the authors of the day. With the starting of this technique which was considered as the product of Latin American literature, but it was also adopted by many non-Latin writers.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that the main followers and practitioners of this technique, Isabel Allende occupies a prominent and significant place who focused on feministic concerns in her works. In her first novel, *The House of Spirit* which won her a number of international awards, we find the technique of magical realism used by her in the present work which was earlier popularized by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

As the practitioner of magical realism in her work, *The House of Spirit*, Allende has stressed on her own family and family sticks spin in the tale narrated by her imbued with reality. The most notable example of the element of magic realism used by the author, Allende, in her work is presented through the protagonist, Clara, who possesses supernatural qualities. She is one in the novel who could interpret dreams. It is undoubtedly, it is an inherent nature in her character that she could foretell the occurrence of earthquakes.

Clara the Clairvoyant could interpret dreams. It was an inborn talent, requiring none of the trying cabalistic study to which her Uncle Marcos had applied himself with far more effort and far less effect... (But) Dreams were not the only thing that Clara read. She could also predict the future and recognize people's intentions, abilities that she maintained throughout her life and that increased with time. (91-92)

The author points that Clara's unusual qualities are not supposed as hindrance at home. She has "no interest in domestic matters" (149).

It goes without saying that as for as Clara's mental powers are concerned, these bother no one and produce negligible disorder: they almost always surfaced within the strict confines of their home. It was true that there had been times, just as they were about to set down to dinner when the saltcellar would suddenly begun to shake and move among the plates and goblets. Clara's ability comes to the surface with the passage of time as she gained more experience when she is growing up. Even her nanny "believes that her magical abilities will come to an end when her womanhood begins" (60). However, Clara's supernatural powers increase when she becomes a woman who accepts domestic responsibilities. She went into a condition of stupor in a moment of exalted states and she keeps moving around the room sitting in her chair.

Allende, in the present work, delineates beautifully the attribution of the supernatural elements in the physical world. It is supposed that Clara's capacity to explicate dreams with the ghost is very central to the plot. The novelist has powerfully explored the interaction between spirit and humans, as well as extraordinary happening are portrayed in the text in a logical way. In the text, one comes across how the element of magical realism is perceived by the characters as well as the readers to look natural and convincing.

Without any shadow of doubt, the term magic realism was connected with feministic aspects by Patricia Hart in 1987 as she describes her view point about Allende's narratives when she asserts: "I define magical realism employed in a femino-centric work." (30) The narration of the author reveals the text as akin for study veraciously as feministic extent. The characters presented by Allende in the work, *A House of Spirits*, have been delineated with extraordinary quality like the description of ghost coupled with magical elements that can change an emotional condition to the physical one, and the ghosts or spirits presented in the book for all females. The writer has aptly presented this idea with more specific instances of supernatural features

associated with females as the novelist puts it as; “In *A House of the Spirit* could predict the sex of the children who were yet to born.... I hope this time it will be a boy, so we can give him any name... It is not one it is two.”(36)

The examples quoted above clearly reflect the use of magic realism by the novelist Isabel Allende who has allowed the supernatural features to delineate the supernatural happening to a particular women's experience which make the present work as magical feminist. In this way, the present work can be studied within under the light of femino-centric text which has been labelled as ‘gynocriticism’ by the author as like Elaine Showalter. It can be said that *The House of the Spirit* is based on feminist criticism as the main focus of the present work is to express the female experiences, and in this regard both the magic realism and feminist approach share some common features. The first and the foremost among these features is that feminist criticism tries to attempt to fail itself from naturalized patriarchal ideas. According to Faris; it cannot be denied that magic realism also engage in the idea of a “patriarchal culture’s disenchantment with itself” (4). Further, the critic, Bowers, finds the “characteristic of magical realism as its transgressive and subversive qualities”(67).

The above critical views reflect before the readers style of uniting which is generally described as l’écriture feminine which is generally related to the French feminists as well as an expatriate perturbed with subjectivity, language and sexuality and women had an interest in writing because of its subservience qualities which could control their operation.

The term l’Ecriture feminism can be applied to Isabel Allende’s work, *A House of Spirit* as a comedy to one critic, Swanson, the narrative does not in all real sense seek to re-create a supposedly ‘feminine language,’ but it does in some ways offers a family discourse against the masculine one.

In this way, after making an incisive and in depth study of Isabel Allende’s ,*The House of Spirits*, we can safely and rightly aver the fact that the female authors like her from Chile have become a part and parcel of this movement's later developments, contributing a focus on women's issues and perceptions of reality. Allende seems to be in love with magic since she finds it as an invisible foundation to liberate the female sex. Hart goes even further and puts the "feminist twist" of the novel "in doubt" (235). She occupies a prominent and towering place among the female forerunners of the post-boom literary movement in Latin America.

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