

Magical Realism

A Trauma Bond

By Brinda Ambal

There are three widely accepted categories of traumatic events: directly experienced, witnessed, and confronted (Frazier). The first two categories are firsthand. The third one, however, is a bit more removed. It rests on the knowledge that something occurred. On a wider scale, this type of trauma can be shared by a population. Collective trauma can refer to either singular events with wide emotional fallout or individual experiences shared by many across a population as a result of a shared attribute of said population (Updegraff). Latin America was marked by both kinds of collective trauma in the time period of both Gabriel García-Márquez and Isabel Allende. As products of their time, García-Márquez and Allende both represent collective trauma through realism and resolve the trauma with magical influences. Allende, however, differs from García-Márquez in that she validates the individual experiences of those undergoing collective trauma and thus enables her magical realist literature to serve as a coping mechanism for members of that population.

The trauma in both authors' works stems from the impacts of colonialism on Latin America. While colonialism was not a direct lived experience of either author or their intended audience, the fallout from the colonization of their

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home countries resulted in widespread and deeply personal trauma. This idea is especially underscored by the parallel binarism both between the colonizers and the colonized and the terms “magic” and “realism.” Both pairs of ideas are defined, in this context, as being opposites of each other. This satisfies a construct articulated by Ferdinand Saussure: binary opposition. In his *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, Saussure argues that when two objects or ideas satisfy this binary opposition, interpretable aspects of each of them inherently thus imply something about the other (Gordon 79). One could extend this definition to argue that for two constructs to be a Hegelian dialectic, they must satisfy Saussure’s theory of binary opposition. In any case, within the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized, each are defined by how they affected the other; in the same way, within the magical realist genre, the “magical” and the “real” exist because each contrasts the other. This parallelism is the basis on which this essay interprets magical realism as a coping mechanism for post-colonial trauma. In these two novels specifically, Allende and García-Márquez represent two traumatic facets of the lives they saw around them that can be traced back to colonial influence: political upheaval and machismo.

It is widely understood in the literature criticism community that much of magical realist literature is an allegory for political instability in post-colonial cultures (Slemon 9). Both *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *House of the Spirits* fulfill this commonality. Just before García-Márquez wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, his home country of Colombia experienced la Violencia. La Violencia was a civilian war, marked by cattle theft, revenge killings, and territorial disputes because the long-standing tension between Colombia’s Conservative and Liberal parties finally boiled over (LaRosa 85-87). In García-Márquez’s

novel, this event is directly reflected in the conflicts between Conservative and Liberal members of the Buendia family. Similarly, just before Isabel Allende wrote *House of the Spirits*, her home country of Chile experienced an event known as The Caravan of Death which marked the beginning of dictator Augusto Pinochet's regime. Pinochet inaugurated his rule by ordering a caravan of soldiers to execute more than 70 different prisoners of war and to enforce strict nighttime curfews and military rule (Collier 359). This is also directly reflected in Allende's novel as a military take-over that captures prisoners of war and enforces a strict curfew. In his Nobel Prize lecture, "The Solitude of Latin America," García-Márquez explains how these events of the twentieth century can be traced back to colonialism:

[T]he immeasurable violence and pain of our history are the result of age-old inequities and untold bitterness, and not a conspiracy plotted three thousand leagues from our home. But many European leaders and thinkers have thought so, with the childishness of old-timers who have forgotten the fruitful excess of their youth: as if it were impossible to find another destiny than to live at the mercy of the two great masters of the world. This, my friends, is the very scale of our solitude.
(García-Márquez)

In this passage, García-Márquez uses both juxtaposition and metaphor to convey the point that Latin American political instability is a result of colonialism. In establishing the metaphor that colonizing countries are like the elderly, he effectively accuses them of political incorrectness and a sometimes intentionally bad memory. This allows him to more clearly explain that their past actions have resulted in decades

of bitterness and inequity. This metaphor is furthered by García-Márquez's use of juxtaposition between the words "childishness" and "old-timers." This juxtaposition allows Marquez to highlight the old, crotchety, and senile elements/characteristics of the elderly instead of their wisdom. Moreover, the words "immeasurable violence and pain" and "untold bitterness" indicate trauma. This diction suggests that colonizers' actions are responsible for the longstanding political instability of Latin America and the resulting collective trauma of Latin American people.

Both *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *House of the Spirits* were written as responses to these political events as evidenced by the direct comparison in both works. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a massive war breaks out and though the isolated oasis town of Macondo is initially immune, the effects of the war eventually reach the Buendia family and tear it apart as well. García-Márquez shows this divide especially between Colonel Aureliano Buendia and Úrsula when Aureliano wants to join the war and Úrsula is adamantly against it. García-Márquez ascribes a quiet resolve to Úrsula. She speaks with carefully clear dialogue and "a firmness inspired by an old lesson" (García-Márquez 261). She wastes no words. In comparison, Aureliano is characterized as a war-crazed fanatic: he "insisted with such perseverance, begged in such a way, broke his code of dignity, to such a degree, that with a little help from here and a little more from there, sneaking about everywhere, with a slippery diligence and a pitiless perseverance, he managed to put together in eight months more money than Ursula had buried" (García-Márquez 261). The asyndeton of this flurry of activity portrays the absurdity of Aureliano's betrayal of Úrsula and highlights the extent to which war drives the family apart. The war itself is also cut and dry; it is described as a "mortal

conflagration that would wipe out all vestiges of a regime of corruption and scandal” and is remarkably similar to descriptions of La Violencia (García-Márquez 262). However, the solution to the war, the rain, is fantastical. For “four months, eleven years, and two days,” the sky “crumbled into a set of destructive storms... that scattered roofs about and... uprooted every last plant of the banana groves” (García-Márquez 339). The difference in the tone of both excerpts— the flowery descriptions of magic versus the biting accounts of Aureliano’s actions— show how both magic and realism are necessary to define each other. The deluge is a symbol of cleansing the world of sin and indicates that traumatic conflict is far entrenched in society; it shows that nothing but an absolute torrent of constant rain can wash it out and allow the people to begin anew. This same interplay between magic and realism to represent political trauma is present in Allende’s work. In *House of the Spirits*, a series of raids very similar to The Caravan of Death is described in very gory, very real terms. In the streets of the city, Alba hears the terrors of the night. She hears “a distant screeching of brakes, the slam of a door, gunfire, the crush of boots, a muffled scream” (Allende 389). The asyndeton of this series of exacting descriptions also shows the direct trauma to Chileans resulting from the political instability of the Pinochet regime. When abducted and forced into solitary confinement, where she exists on the verge of death, Alba clings to magic to stay alive. She speaks to the ghost of her grandmother Clara, who encourages her to retain the little sanity she has left by writing a journal in her head. Clara describes seeing her grandmother dressed in pure white, flowy linen and everyone who ignored the plight of the prisoners “on a raft adrift on a sea of sorrow” (Allende 414). These apparitions provide Alba a distraction from her

imminent death, and her magical ability to conjure them up is the source of her strength to survive. These magical resolutions allow readers to look at their own life experiences (and perhaps, trauma) from a different, more approachable angle. Phillip Swanson, a professor of Latin American studies and one of the world's leading experts on magical realism in Latin America, purports that magical realist fiction is used as an allegory for political instability and trauma because it opens "imaginative new perspectives on social or political reality" (Swanson 168). Both authors have new perspectives, but they are different. The resolutions occur in slightly different ways. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the rain is a magical resolution that eases society's problems as a whole and provides a fresh start. It produces an overarching effect. In Allende's work, however, the magical elements are deeply personal effects of political trauma. Alba is forced to draw inward for the strength to overcome her situation. Allende's magical realism is about conveying a personal reaction to the trauma that occurs as a result of politics or post-colonialism. It gives agency back to victims of trauma.

Looking at a slightly more personal traumatic effect of colonialism, machismo, also shows García-Márquez's lack of depiction of the personal side of collective trauma. Machismo, according to poet and essayist Octavio Paz, is the "masculine pole of life" defined by aggressiveness, insensitivity, invulnerability, and power (Paz 81). In his book-length essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz describes how Mexican men have built up resentment from the solitude and lack of power post-colonialism, and that this resentment provokes the macho to commit "unforeseen acts that produce confusion, horror, and destruction" (Paz 81-82). He argues that this barbaric

masculinity is at the root of the broken families, morals, and politics he sees in Mexico.

Characters in both García-Márquez's and Allende's works exhibit this toxic masculinity Paz describes as the root of Latin American trauma; it is important to note, though, that just as with political trauma, trauma as a result of machoistic attitudes is depicted as having a magical overarching solution in García-Márquez's work. This contrasts with Allende's work, where the magic lies in individuals personally contending with the aftermath of trauma. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Aureliano Segundo owns a small farm with a small herd of animals. His entire character is built around his macho traits: his large and sturdy stature, his ability to eat a lot of food, and his extramarital affair. Above all, his affair is presented as the most normal of situations. García-Márquez describes the series of events very clearly:

First, with the pretext of taking the burden off his wife, he transferred his parties. Then, with the pretext that the animals were losing their fertility, he transferred his barns and stables. Finally, with the pretext that it was cooler in his concubine's house, he transferred the small office in which he handled his business. (García-Márquez 272)

The anaphora in this series of sentences with a transition word followed by the phrase "with the pretext of" attributes a tone of logic and normality to the situation. Throughout Aureliano Segundo's back and forth, the reactions of his wife Fernanda and his concubine Petra Cotes are not developed beyond their external actions. The traumatic effects of Aureliano Segundo's infidelity are also resolved with elements of magic, but as events that occur to the characters. Fernanda is overcome with tunnel vision, blind to all her surroundings except for the train,

so she packs her bags and leaves; his daughter Meme goes mute from the tragedy and is followed by yellow butterflies everywhere she goes, so she too leaves with her mother (García-Márquez 316). While the magical is defined as different than the traumatic reality – as dictated by the Saussurean theory of binary opposition – and provides a solution to the trauma, it does not validate the experiences of the individuals. The trauma simply fixes itself. In Allende’s novel, *House of the Spirits*, Esteban Trueba also falls victim to the machismo mentality and beats his wife and his daughter, a very traumatic experience for both. When he catches his daughter Blanca having premarital relations, he “was unable to restrain his evil character and charged her with his horse, beating her mercilessly, lash upon lash, until the girl fell flat and rigid to the ground” (Allende 199). When Esteban dragged Blanca back to her mother, he assailed her with a verbal tirade and later physical blow:

He accused of her having raised Blanca without morals, without religion, without principles, like a libertine atheist, even worse, without a sense of her own class because you could understand if she wanted to do it with someone from a decent family, but not with this hick, this simpleton, this hothead, this lazy good-for-nothing-son-of-a-bitch... A wave of blood immediately rushed to his head. He lost control and struck her in the face, knocking her against the wall. Clara fell to the floor without a sound. (Allende 200)

The cadence of Allende’s writing, built around anaphora and asyndeton, truly shows the constant barrage Clara and Blanca both experience. These are not events described simply from the bird’s eye view. It is an experience the reader is a part of.

The resolution to this machoistic trauma is, of course, magical, but it is borne of Clara's agency. Clara turns full force back to the magical elements of her life, which she had been suppressing. She calls her spiritual friends back to her other house and resumes conversations with extraterrestrial beings and the dead to cope with her own feelings and live her own life (Allende 210). By putting a magical spin on Clara's coping, Allende makes moving past this kind of collective trauma easier to adopt. This same phenomenon is being trialed in psychology case studies as a form of therapy. It involves framing traumatic events and their emotional fallout within fantasy to ease negative emotions and somatic responses to triggers of said trauma (DeRios). This new psychotherapy is initially being used to treat directly-experienced trauma in children. Literature, through its wider scope, might bring the benefits of this kind of therapy to a larger audience by framing realistic traumatic experiences within elements of fantasy and magic as magic realism does.

This essay rests on the synthesis of two definitions of magical realism: that it exists as a Hegelian dialectic because the terms "magical" and "realism" are in direct Saussurean binary opposition and that as a genre it must be a commentary on the political or social situations of a nation or race. The interplay of the real and the magical as social and political commentary allow works within this genre to help groups of people heal from trauma. Both Gabriel García-Márquez's and Isabelle Allende's magical realist works serve as a coping mechanism for the traumatic events experienced by people of their respective countries. The interaction between these two words helps ease the tension that exists as a result of experiencing trauma. Allende extends this by balancing the intensely personal and collective natures of national trauma. Her works

are constructed to connect personally with people. They show the true depth and range of human emotion in addition to the illogicality of the broken world of Latin America that García-Márquez conveys. Thus, while both Gabriel García-Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Isabel Allende's *House of the Spirits* acknowledge this collective trauma, through her writing Allende specifically validates the individual experiences of those undergoing indirectly experienced collective trauma and thus enables the magical realist literature to serve as a coping mechanism.

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