

Magical Feminism in the Americas

Resisting Female Marginalisation and
Oppression through Magic

Md Abu Shahid Abdullah

East West University

Series in Literary Studies



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Table of Contents

	Preface	v
Chapter 1	Introduction	1
Chapter 2	Magical Realism, Feminism, and Magical Feminism: History, Features and Functions	9
Chapter 3	Magical Feminism and Female Marginalisation in the Americas	27
	Part I. Attacking Dictatorship and Transforming Destructive Patriarchal System	45
Chapter 4	Resisting Patriarchy and Challenging Dictatorship in Isabel Allende's <i>The House of the Spirits</i>	47
Chapter 5	Reconstructing Personal Identity and Creating an Alternative National History: Magical Realism and the Marginalised Female Voice in Gioconda Belli's <i>The Inhabited Woman</i>	61
	Part II. Resisting Colonial Constraints and Asserting Female Identity	75
Chapter 6	Relating Women with Cultural and Socio-Political Framework and Highlighting the Issues of Marginality in Kiana Davenport's <i>Shark Dialogues</i>	77
Chapter 7	Resisting White Supremacy and Constructing Ethnic and Female Identity: Magical Resistance in Louise Erdrich's <i>Tracks</i>	89

	Part III. Protesting Cultural Domination and Challenging Nationalist Male Politics	103
Chapter 8	Linking Magical Realism and Transnational Feminism: Developing Female Identity in Cristina García's <i>Dreaming in Cuban</i>	105
Chapter 9	Political and Gendered Magical Realism in Ana Castillo's <i>So Far from God</i>	119
	Part IV. Questioning Racial and Gendered Supremacy and Empowering Women	133
Chapter 10	Healing Trauma of Sexual Abuse and Rejecting Patriarchal Authority in Gail Anderson-Dargatz's <i>The Cure for Death by Lightning</i>	135
Chapter 11	Challenging White History and Emphasising Female Solidarity in Gloria Naylor's <i>Mama Day</i>	147
Chapter 12	Conclusion	161
	Works Cited	169
	Index	181

Preface

At one time a predominantly male-dominated literary world tended to view the advent of magic realism in fiction mainly as a phenomenon starring a few major Latin American male novelists. Most literary critics went as far back as Jorge Luis Borges to locate the origins of this kind of narrative where the lines between fiction and realism could and would blur in the hands of adept writers of fiction. They viewed magic realism almost always as the Latin American literary efflorescence of male authors excelling in narrating the lives of people in fictional worlds who, despite being immersed in the quotidian, were going through events that would seem magical to everyone but themselves. Moreover, most of these critics agreed that it was the generation of male Latin American novelists led by Colombia's Gabriel Garcia Marquez who had made a noteworthy movement out of such unique blending of the quotidian and the magical. True, every once in a while they would place a woman novelist or two among the writers excelling in the form. But no doubt these critics felt the example of someone like Isabel Allende was another case of the exception validating the rule.

It is the great merit of Md. Abu Shahid Abdullah's *Magical Feminism in the Americas: Resisting Female Marginalisation and Oppression through Magic* to illustrate how, far from being an exception, Isabel Allende is one of many distinctive Latin American female writers of recent times producing quality fiction in this unique mode. Abdullah is able to prove convincingly in the course of his work that women writers of the whole of North as well as South America have been depicting the lot of women negotiating a path for themselves compellingly by depicting situations where the real and the magical are fabulously intertwined. He also stresses that they have been making use of their female-centred narratives to write persuasively about and against male domination and patriarchal tyrannies.

Indeed, Abdullah's book title clearly indicates his intentions in this regard. *Magical Feminism in the Americas: Resisting Female Marginalisation and Oppression through Magic* is a critical work of importance because of the way it showcases the phenomenon of women writers—stretching all the way from Chile to Canada, on the one hand, and from Cuba to Hawaii, on the other—making creative use of their experience of life in male-controlled societies that inevitably tend to repress and marginalise women's voices. As well, Abdullah is

able to show how these women writers make impressive use of their novelistic license to reveal women finding ingenious ways of overcoming the shackles patriarchy tends to impose on their sex.

Abdullah first analyses Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* in some detail to reveal how the Chilean novelist depicts some of his women characters forging bonds to resist male tyranny. He emphasises the way Allende resorts through her clairvoyant protagonist to a non-linear and unconventional narrative mode to forge an alternative to dominant male ways of writing. Abdullah then features the Nicaraguan novelist Giaconda Belli's work, *The Inhabited Woman*, to portray what he perceives to be its rendering of "the double victimisation of women" by male-induced systemic pressures. Belli is seen by him as a writer deploying magic as a means for his fictional women of empowerment and resistance against patriarchal forces, as if to provide an alternative national history. Abdullah next discusses the Hawaiian-American Kiana Davenport's novel *Shark Dialogues*. Here too Abdullah features a contemporary American female novelist able to give voice to marginalised and repressed females ingeniously. Abdullah finds in the book the use of an imaginatively structured polyphonic narrative that blends myths with recorded history. Once again, he details the way this representative of the new generation of women writers goes beyond conventional male modes of story-telling to devise alternative methods of narration absorbingly.

Abdullah's next exhibit in his gallery of women magical realist writers is the USA's Louis Edrich. To Abdullah, her novel *Tracks* fuses myth and magic with the lives of Chippewa Native American women's lot in postmodern ways. He sees Edrich deploying the supernatural to counter the colonising impositions of white male supremacy. Interestingly, Abdullah argues that the carnivalesque manner is applied and the Native American trickster figure put to use in Edrich's fictional work to depict subversive but indigenous ways pursued to cope with white male colonisers/ exploiters of Native American land and peoples.

Abdullah next deals with two women writers of the Americas who too in their unique styles use their works to protest as well as challenge white male tyrannies. The first of these writers is the Cuban novelist Cristina Garcia. Abdullah focuses on her use of the phoenix myth in her novel *Dreaming in Cuban* and notes how she uses a dialogic narrative where multiple points of view are juxtaposed to undermine Eurocentric perspectives. The critic sees Garcia highlighting immigrant Cuban-American women's endeavours to cope with the sort of double marginalisation they are subjected to as exiles in the

United States. Abdullah then discusses at some length the Chicana writer Ana Castillo. To him, her novel *So Far from God* is another instance of a magical realist women writer of the Americas using ingenious and magical situations to represent women's bid to empower themselves against patriarchal systems that tend to downgrade them. To Abdullah, Castillo plots her narrative to showcase native healing traditions and beliefs. Communing with dead ancestors, Abdullah writes, is, for Castillo, a pathway for women looking for ways out of the sufferings they undergo.

In the final section of *Magical Feminism in the Americas: Resisting Female Marginalisation and Oppression through Magic*, Abdullah spotlights the works of two more noteworthy female novelists of the Americas—Canada's Gail Anderson-Dargatz and the United States's Gloria Naylor. He sees both applying magical realist devices in depicting women ingeniously tackling racist and sexist abuses. In the process they also highlight the importance of countering such abuses through female solidarity and empowerment. He shows how Anderson-Dargatz's novel *The Cure for Death by Lightning* portrays the traumas caused by sexually abusive males on their female relatives. As for Naylor, Abdullah emphasises how she describes females bonding with each other to contend with male dominance, utilising magic and native healing means to deal with male aggression. To him, Naylor seems to be bent on depicting women healing each other's wounds in such situations, finding this route to be the best way out of the trauma and wounds that have been inflicted on them.

Abdullah's *Magical Feminism in the Americas: Resisting Female Marginalisation and Oppression through Magic* is thus a book drawing attention to a phenomenon in contemporary writing that is well worth paying attention to for anyone interested in magic/magical realism, quality contemporary female writing branching out of South and North America, or feminist fictional works of note for all us interested in recent developments in fiction, especially in the Americas, and in quality feminist writing. His is a persuasive account of representative women writers of the region who have taken recourse to magic realist modes to articulate not merely the plight of their sisters but also to illustrate ways out of a situation induced by their double marginalisation by patriarchy as a whole and colonial domination in particular.

What is remarkable to me is that Abdullah is a male critic and teacher of literature who has spent most of his life in Bangladesh. To have developed expertise to such an extent that he can write a book like *Magical Feminism in the Americas: Resisting Female Marginalisation and Oppression through Magic* is an amazing feat. Moreover, he appears to have read the books written in

Spanish on his own, as the extracts he has quoted from them in the language reveal. His book seems to have mastered the critical literature on the subject fully. His writing is also lucid. The book is comprehensive in its coverage and organised effectively to encompass representative women writing in the magical realist mode from all across the Americas. I feel that the book will be useful to students of fiction, feminist writing and comparative literature. It is a work that will surely be referred to for any of these areas as well as anyone wanting to know about contemporary women's writing of distinction from the Americas that have relevance for all of us—east or west, north or south.

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Index

A

acculturation, 100
agency, 2
alliance, 55
alternative history, 4
American Civil War, 27
American Dreams, 122
American Independence War, 27
American Revolution, 90
ancient forest, 100
anointment, 128
anti-dictatorship, 71
archetypal, 69
aristocratic society, 49
armed struggle, 68

B

Banana Company Massacre, 100
bicultural, 107
Black English dialects, 155
black magic, 152
bodily deformity, 146
borderland culture, 33
bourgeois culture, 38

C

Canadian gothic, 146
capitalism, 10
carnival laughter, 99
Catholicism, 125
celestial status, 148

Changó, 117
chemotherapy, 130
chicken coop, 156
Child Welfare Act, 90
Christian missionaries, 41
Civil Wars, 31
class conflict, 4
Cold War, 37
collective amnesia, 100
collective memory, 43
commodities, 86
communal leader, 150
comradeship, 31
conjure women, 151
consequence, 65
consolation, 16
consumerist society, 121
corporeal symbolism, 87
corporeality, 67
Coyote myth, 143
critical determinism, 91
cryptic, 153
Cuban Revolution, 38
cultural degradation, 82
cultural extinction, 90
cultural integration, 81
cultural memory, 147
cultural purism, 113
Curanderas, 128
curanderismo, 128
cyclical, 58
cyclicity, 114

D

Dawes Act, 94
 death, 105
 defamiliarisation, 15
 defense mechanism, 4
 deformity, 35
 depravity, 141
 dictatorship, 5
 displacement, 80
 dispossession, 66
 disruption, 25
 dream motifs, 91
 dystopia, 68

E

ecological imperialism, 41
 ecstasy, 67
 empathy, 161
 empiricism, 58
 enigma, 66
 environmental destruction, 5, 77
 environmental unity, 77
 epitome, 57
 ethnic absolutism, 113
 ethnicity, 4
 evil eye, 129
 extrasensory, 55

F

fantastic rhetoric, 127
 fantasy, 11
 female absence, 68
 female awareness, 164
 female clairvoyance, 4
 female emancipation, 1
 female oppression, 82
 female productiveness, 156

female resistance, 163
 female solidarity, 49
 feminisation, 5
 feminism, 2
 feminist-lesbian miracle, 126
 femino-centric, 51
 fertility rite, 8
 flashbacks, 96
 fluid, 58
 folk healing, 7
 folk tradition, 15
 folklore, 36
 folkloric figure, 122
 forecast, 150
 foreign education, 155
 fortune teller, 42

G

gastrointestinal obstruction, 129
 genealogy, 148
 geographical boundaries, 112
 globalisation, 11
 Great Mahele, 78
 Gulf War, 123
 gynarchy, 85

H

hallucination, 95
 Hawaiian colonialism, 79
 hegemony, 12
 herbal treatment, 128, 130
 herstory, 87
 heterogeneity, 147
 homosexual relationship, 55
 homosexual tendency, 126
 human trafficking, 41
 humour, 34

hyper-appetite, 115
hyperbole, 34
hyper-sexuality, 115
hyphenated identity, 112
hysterical, 57

I

illusory, 123
imaginary realm, 16
immortality, 114
Indian burial, 93
indigenous belief, 157
indigenous culture, 81
individualism, 144
institutional violence, 161
intergenerational transformation,
 106
intuitive knowledge, 152
isolation, 80

J

Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, 100

K

kahuna, 82

L

La Llorona, 124
La Malogra, 124
landscape, 136
leprosy, 88
lesbian relationship, 143
lesbianism, 166
lo real maravilloso, 9
logic, 54

M

magical aura, 114
Magical feminism, 2
magical healing, 7
magical powder, 152
magical realism, 1
male-dominated narratives, 119
marginalisation, 1
masculine history, 33
material presence, 68
memoir, 48
memory, 40
mestiza, 119
metamorphosis, 92
Mexican American mythology, 124
migration, 108
military coup, 48
military domination, 41
military regime, 59
mimetic realism, 161
modernity, 154
monocultural, 107
multiple voices, 155
mutilation, 121
mysterious, 11
myth, 17
mythic realism, 37

N

naming, 99
native women, 65
natural calamities, 150
natural medicines, 151
neocolonialism, 31
non-linear, 58
non-Western, 2
norm-defying women, 162

nuclear radiation, 79

O

Obatalá, 115
 official history, 8
 opium smuggling, 41
 oral culture, 36
 oral reality, 147
 oral tradition, 8
 orishas, 113

P

Paraguayan War, 27
 patriarchal constraints, 4
 patriarchal society, 16
 patriarchy, 3
 Pearl Harbour, 79
 phallocentric discourse, 85
 phoenix myth, 112
 polyphonic narratives, 77
 polyvocal, 8
 postcolonial third phase, 113
 postcolonialism, 12
 post-Conquest, 119
 postcontact culture, 100
 Post-Enlightenment period, 152
 postmodernism, 12
 posttraumatic stress, 115
 power, 67
 powerlessness, 116
 pre-Columbian, 119
 precontact culture, 100
 pre-Hispanic myth, 43
 premature death, 66
 preservation, 100
 psychic surgery, 130

R

race, 4
 rationality, 54
 rebirth, 114
 redemption, 49
 reincarnation, 62
 renaming, 99
 resisting force, 120
 resurrection, 105
 revolutionary zeal, 163
 rewrite history, 65
 ritualistic, 96
 Roman Catholic Church, 125

S

sacrificial ritual, 153
 salvage, 149
santera, 114
 santería, 40
 Santería goddess, 113
 science fiction, 11
 scrapbook, 135
 self-discovery, 53
 sexual prejudices, 5
 sexual promiscuity, 122
 shaman, 30
 silk stockings, 137
 social awareness, 63
 socialist culture, 38
 Socialist Revolution, 106
 Somoza dictatorship, 42
 Somoza dynasty, 42
 Spanish American Independence
 Wars, 27
 speaking text, 155
 spectral guidance, 111
 spirit, 111

spiritual diseases, 129
spiritual presence, 49
spiritual realism, 29
spiritual worldview, 148
spirituality, 23
subjectivity, 71
subversive, 1
supernaturalism, 109
survival tactic, 32
systematic silencing, 130

T

tapestry, 78
telepathic communication, 105
temporality, 67
the Americas, 3
the carnivalesque, 97
the gothic, 38
the grotesque, 35
The Indian Act, 28
the Spaniards, 62
the uncanny, 14
therapeutic feature, 139
timeless, 96
tracheotomy, 121
traditional burial, 93
transgenerational haunting, 145
transgressive, 1
transnational feminism, 110
trauma, 1
traumatic imagination, 135
traumatic realism, 4
tribal culture, 93
trickster, 99

trickster figure, 98
Tsichtinako, 127
tyranny, 5

U

universal phenomenon, 161
US-Mexican War, 27
utopia, 68

V

velvet flax, 139
Vietnam War, 79
vision quest, 29
voodoo, 153

W

wellbeing, 77
Western education system, 147
Western rationalism, 30
White exploitation, 147
witchcraft, 23
World War I, 27
World War II, 27

X

Xicanisma, 128

Y

Yemayá, 40
Yoruba, 40