

# MAGICAL REALISM: FLUIDITY OF TIME, SPACE, AND IDENTITY IN ISABEL ALLENDE'S *CITY OF THE BEASTS*

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**Abstract :** This universe, since genesis, has never been devoid of stories. Stories constitute selfhood, rectitude, audacity, frailty, fidelity, power, guile, and infamy. Narration or narrative technique, being a subsistent art of storytelling, underpins a vision or an ideology. To constitute a cogent narratology is to defend or deny an anterior narrative voice. Ofttimes, vocalization of peripheral resistance intrigues attention. Narrative reality found no yielding passages to transcribe the primitive innate American thoughts and in particular the indigenous conscience of Latin American writers. Magical realism ascertained its own modus operandi as an emolument to creativity. *City of the Beasts* by Isabel Allende is the first novel in the adolescent trilogy. The Chilean- American author has penned the novel in such a way that the journey navigates the readers into the wilderness of the Amazon in a Conradian style. Alexander Cold, due to unforeseen circumstances, has to resort under his grandmother's shelter until his mother's recovery from illness. This paper attempts to locate the fluidity of time, space, and identity based on Wendy B. Faris' final characteristic of magical realism.

## **Index Terms – Allende, Magical realism, Faris, Time, Space, Identity**

A man sans a story is world less. A story sans a narration is word less. The origin of story begins from the word 'Kun' (meaning 'being' in Arabic). This universe, since genesis, has never been devoid of stories. Stories constitute selfhood, rectitude, audacity, frailty, fidelity, power, guile, infamy, etc. They perturb with cacophonous reality and bemuse with their beguiling falsity. They forge senses to trot on oblique planes and sojourn somewhere into wilderness. The centroidal artery of Homo sapiens community turfs in narrating adventures, allegories, anecdotes, epics, fairy tales, legends, and myths. Stories transcend time and space.

Narration or narrative technique, being a subsistent art of storytelling, underpins a vision or an ideology. To constitute a cogent narratology is to defend or deny an anterior narrative voice. Ofttimes, vocalization of peripheral resistance intrigues attention. The harnessed narration functions as a point of counter action, a stratagem of resistance, and an act of intransigence. Ross Chambers in *Story and Situation* enunciates "To tell a story is to exercise power. Storytelling is an oppositional practice, a practice of resistance used by the weak against the strong... oppositional narrative in exploiting the narrative situation, discovers a power, not to change the essential structure of narrative situations, but to change its other through the achievement and maintenance of authority, in ways that are potentially radical" (50).

The term "Magic realism" was first coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in his work *Nach-expressionismus: magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei (Post- Expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of the newest European painting)*. Magical Realism has constituted ingress as an antithesis of European narrative modes. This transiting paradigm in narrative mode is viewed as an expression of reality through distortionary, security through obscurity and certainty through ambiguity. The longstanding European Narrative reality found no yielding passages to transcribe the primitive innate American thoughts and in particular the indigenous conscience of Latin American writers. In the wake of this inadequacy, magical realism ascertained its own modus operandi as an emolument to creativity. Seymour Menton in *Magical Realism Rediscovered, 1918- 1981* validates as "the emergence and persistence of magic realism in the twentieth century may be attributed to the western world's search for an alternative to the limitations of an overtly rational and technological society" (pp. 9- 10).

*City of the Beasts* by Isabel Allende is the first novel in the adolescent trilogy followed by *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon*. Featuring multiple themes, this fictional work is engrossed in adventure and magical realism. The Chilean- American author has penned the novel in such a way that the journey navigates the readers into the wilderness of the Amazon in a Conradian style. Alexander Cold, due to unforeseen circumstances, has to resort under his grandmother's shelter until his mother's recovery from illness. The fifteen-year-old adolescent finds it difficult to be in the company of his tenacious magazine reporter- grand mother Kate Cold, who joins the expedition crew to the Amazon. The expedition troop comprises the anthropologist Dr. Ludovic Leblanc, the beautiful Venezuelan doctor Omayra Torres, the photographer Timothy Bruce, his assistant Joel Gonzalez, the Brazilian guide Cesar Santos, and his twelve-year-old daughter Nadia. The magazine International Geographic funds the voyage. The group en routes the path of erstwhile explorers to purview El Dorado, the mythical gold city and to trace Yeti, the mysterious Beasts.

Wendy B. Faris' *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* is a seminal work reconnoitering the treatment of magical realism in contemporary fictions. This critical work distinguishes the definition of the term, its characteristics, significance, theoretical perspectives, narrative techniques, cultural politics, gender relations, dynamics of postcolonial alterity and focuses on writers including Juan Rulfo, Gunter Grass, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Ben Okri, Patrick Suskind, Toni Morrison, Ana Castillo and Isabel Allende. Faris in her *Ordinary Enchantments* proclaims her aims "to explore the importance of magical realism in contemporary literature...by describing the characteristics that define, the techniques...(and) providing additional proof of the significance of magic realism in contemporary literature" (pp. 4-5). In this work, Faris proposes the "five characteristics of magical realism" as irreducible element, presence of the phenomenal world, unsettling doubts, merging realms, and disruptions of time, space, and identity (*Ordinary Enchantments* 3). This paper attempts to locate the fluidity of time, space, and identity based on Faris' final characteristic of magical realism.

Magical realist text disrupts the universally adhered conceptions of Time, Space, and Identity. The discernment of these three senses is eroded by presenting the mundane as magical and magical as mundane. In magical realism, "we wonder what kind of beings we are seeing. It is not so much a question of how but of what?" (Faris 33). The description of Beasts in *City of the Beasts* disrupts the sense of time and space. A magical realist text propagates strange spaces and infinite times by exploiting the universal provisions of time and space. Adventurous Alex, androgynous Nadia, the shaman Walimai, and his wife spirit reach the tepui in the Eye of the world. The base of the tepui has hooded with massive ferns. The troupe moved forward circumspectly "beneath those gigantic plants, (where) the sky disappeared and they sank into a universe of green; time stopped and reality lost its familiar forms" (252). The altiplano was awning luscious flowers mellowed with thick blue honey, the throbbing leaves homed saccharine scented water droplets, the air was hefty, and the stones scorched as coals. Alex had no knowledge of minerals but was successful to apperceive opals, topazes, formations of quartz and tourmaline. The crew reaching the last passage of humongous labyrinth found the vertical countenance of mountains featuring vegetation. The up warp arose as white thick cotton and the sky was invisible. The canopy fabricated "a strange optical phenomenon: six transparent moons floating in a milky sky... wheeling in the air were birds he (Alex) had never seen before" (260). The feathered creatures sprung into space as "translucid and filmy as jellyfish, others as solid as black condors" (261).

Alex felt perplexed seeing the vast incredulous space, the gigantic reptiles emitting perfumes of courtesan and flying golden fish in the murky tunnels. Nadia admired the intricate subterranean labyrinth with no jarring skepticism. However, Alex was still trying to find rational explanations for what he had witnessed. Alex reasoned those tepuis, so isolated from the rest of the planet, were the last enclaves of the Paleolithic era, where the flora and fauna of thousands and thousands of years ago had preserved. They must have been led to a kind of Galapagos Island, where the most ancient species had escaped genetic mutation or extinction...were animals coexisted with the first human beings on the planet. (258)

The lives of Beasts in the city of El Dorado disrupt the perception of time. The history of the Beasts seems prehistoric. Walimai, who frequently visited the city to deliver the messages about the tribes, had never witnessed a Beast being born or die in his lifetime. People of the Mist have safeguarded the Beasts in order to

protect their tribe's history. These giant sloths had not evolved as the Indians of Tapirawa-teri. Witch men like Walimai recited the epic poems narrating the past events of the tribe. Many a messengers had died and were reconstituted by others but the messages delivered were treasured alive in the memory of the Beasts. The history of People of the Mist is conserved in "the memory of Beasts (that) contained all the information the messengers of man had given them; they were living archives. The Indians did not know writing, but their history was never lost because the Beasts forget nothing. By questioning them, patiently and over long periods, they could retrieve the tribe's past from its beginnings twenty thousand years before" (pp.272-3).

Faris in *Ordinary Enchantments* professes, "Magical realism reorients not only our habits of time and space but our sense of identity as well. The multivocal nature of the narrative and the cultural hybridity that characterize magical realism extends to its characters, which tend toward a radical multiplicity... expands on this idea of multiple and mobile identity" (p. 25).

Besides disrupting time and space, magical realism reframes the sense of identity too. Fusion of identities in a character expands its potentiality to believe the unbelievable agency in magical realism. This potentiality breeding from multiple identities sets benign metamorphoses in Alex and Nadia to embark into wilderness. Alex has a mystical encounter with a black jaguar in the camp of Mauro Carias, one of the rich adventurers in the Amazon. Fascinated by the countenance of the huge cougar, Alex steps approximal to the animal in a semi-conscious state. The corporeal property of the physical world faded away when "their eyes locked in a silent dialogue" (104). The big cat "Spoke his name: Alexander and he answered in his own voice... The cat and its counterpart repeated those words three times: Alexander Jaguar; Alexander, Jaguar; Alexander Jaguar" (105). For a moment, Alex was in a mysterious world fused together with the jaguar waking up from the loss of contact with environment. He strived to decipher the event with words to Nadia. The description fell short because for him such understanding was beyond his cognizance. At this juncture, Nadia transpired the occurrence by saying "the jaguar recognized you because it is your totemic animal... we all have an animal spirit that accompanies us. It is like our soul. We don't all find our animal; usually it's only great warriors and shamans who do, but you discovered yours without looking. Your name is Jaguar" (108).

In the course of rituals conducted after the death of chief Mocarita, Alex once again finds the connectivity with his totemic animal. Walimai was administered to conduct the funeral obsequies in congruence with ancient Indian traditions. The shaman prepared a magic concoction, the vigorous "ayahuasca" for the tribal men to linger deep into their hearts. The consumption of the potion hauls Alex and Nadia into the totemic kingdom. Both sense the permutation in their anatomies. Alex tangled with the Jaguar and Nadia with the Eagle. The adolescent boy felt "the animal was not in him, or he in it; the two of them had blended into a single being, simultaneously animal and youth...possessed with supernatural energy...he was powerful, feared, solitary, invincible, the king of the South American jungle. No other animal was as fierce as he was" (225). Nadia who was slim as reed flew upward with "her powerful eagle wings...the slightest movement was enough to change the direction or speed of her course...flying at a great height, calm, unworried, detached, observing the earth beneath her without curiosity" and both "borne by the wind, the eagle was as invincible as the jaguar was on land" (226).

The present study based on Faris' concept of magical realism features the fluidity of Time, Space, and Identity in Isabel Allende's novel *City of the Beasts*.

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