Chapter IV

The Miraculous and the Empirical in Women Writers: Telling Truth Through Fantasy

“Reading the world always precedes reading the word and reading the word means continually reading the world”. (Paulo Freire 1998:4) The Latin American woman writer uses the mode of Magical Realism to ‘read’ the world around her. She ‘reads’ the world, surrounded by women who transfer belief systems, values, fears and tastes helping her gain an understanding of life from the immediacy of the rich experiences that become a part of her. It is with the help of Magical Realism that she describes her everyday life. Magical Realism gives a unique quality to the ‘reading of the world’ for the woman writers from Latin America. They rejoice being a part of the woman’s world and this special kind of belonging gives them the freedom to question it.

These texts, in a traditional study, will not escape the feminist theories. If studied under the lens of Feminism, the texts stagnate because of a prescriptive approach and varied experiences are lost. They become dynamic and living texts when seen against the background of the world that the women writers are portraying-their anxieties, fears, demands and dreams. The approach that needs to be taken to understand the magical real texts by women writers is to engage in a ‘restless search’ of the woman’s life in Latin America. The texts then become a critical reading of the reality of the woman’s world in Latin America. (Mendoza 2010)

An exploration of texts by women writers of the magical realist mode from Latin America helps to appreciate how the mode is applied by them as an expression of the woman in Latin America. In addition, there is a need to go beyond the stereotypes and assumptions that have been made of the roles of women in developing nations in general and Latin
America, in particular. The ‘El Boom’ introduced Magical Realism to the Western world through the male voices but a number of women’s voices became accessible during the Post-Boom. It is significant to examine women writers for their individualistic use of Magical Realism.

Most studies treat women’s writing from a feminist approach, protesting against women being treated as the ‘Other’ in a male dominated world. But as individuals in a society both men and women have to deal with power structures, the only difference being that they may be different since the public space and the private space differ. Even though women writers in Latin America may use the technique to find a voice against the patriarchal world, this thesis foregrounds the facets women writers contribute to the mode and thereby enhance our understanding of the Poetics of Magical Realism.

In the Foreword to Rosario Ferre’s anthology, *The Youngest Doll*, Jean Franco states that Ferre, inspite of the influence of a European literary tradition, was motivated to write because it allowed her ‘a different voice, a vernacular voice’. This becomes the basis of the study of the women writers of the Magical Realist mode in Latin America- to find the voice that is native to the Latin American woman. The Latin American woman was influenced by the Feminist Movement that was taking place in the sixties in the West but the impact of the early women writers of Latin America has been substantial in their writing. By studying the texts in detail, there is a glimpse of the world that Latin American women lived in.

The Post-Boom period does not make such a contrast between the mythic past and the present as they did in the 1960s. The magical events lie in situations which are of the ‘here and now’ and the demarcation between the magical and the real is not as apparent as it was in writers like Julio Cortazar, Octavia Paz, Ruben Dario, Jorge Amado, Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Alejo Carpentier. Donald L. Shaw’s observation is significant when he says “The here and now of Latin America figures prominently as a theme-along with fictional
treatments of the continent’s history designed to comment indirectly to here and now”. What must be taken note of is ‘along with fictional treatments of the continent’s history...’ the present continues to focus on the magical past (Vlad 2008:4).

The Post Boom is considered by critics as a ‘local’ form of postmodernism. This form of ‘postmodernism’ has its roots in the oral tradition where the story-teller himself occupied a post modernist space and not in the Western concept of Post modernism. The short story in Latin America in the Post Boom period “is complex in form and content, featuring a variety of styles that includes parody, the introspective fiction, the grotesque or fantasy” (Vlad 2008: 6) This goes against the postmodernist notion that genres are not valid and that there is a breakdown of forms.

Studies of women writers using the Magical Real mode highlight the potential of the mode to resist the patriarchal world that is prevalent in all societies. The motif of the Angel in the House, the hysterical/mad woman in the attic and the witch are socially constructed by the male-dominated world to ‘Other’ woman. The pain that women feel when they are not allowed to express themselves is marginalized to a magical space and thereby discounted as not important. The need to explore the intrinsic quality of being woman in the Latin American world must be highlighted, rather than merely study Magical Realism by women writers as a mode to express their protest against the patriarchal world. The texts give evidence of a kind of state in womanhood which resembles Julia Kristeva’s ‘semiotic chora’ (Kristeva 1984:17). This stage comes before the symbolic and is connected with the mother; it is a pre-oedipal state. Kristeva states that the symbolic suppresses the semiotic but the semiotic speaks and disturbs the symbolic through works of art. The Latin American women writers, in their magical realist texts, show an ability to return to the semiotic, where their connections with the women in their lives get fore grounded. These connections give them so
much sustenance that they do not feel the need to be a part of the symbolic. The magical spaces like the semiotic give the Latin American women writers a creative space.

In the Foreword to the Anthology *Short Stories by Latin American Women: The Magic and the Real* ed by Zapata, Celia Correas, Isabel Allende, the leading woman’s voice in Latin America notes the validity of women’s writing in Latin America. A creative artist herself, she stresses the fact that it is only recently that women took an active part in literary activity, thereby ‘violating the code of silence into which (the Latin American woman) was born’. Women have taken a lot of interest in writing in the Magical Realist tradition in order to ‘redefine feminity’. There is a ‘subversive kind of happiness’ in their use of the male-centred magical realism (de Zapata 2003:xii)

Though there were instances of women’s writing in Latin America during the Colonial Period and later the Independence Period, it was in the 1920s that women became proactive and “went from being objects of desire to being agents of desire” (de Zapata 2003:xii). In his Introduction to ‘Other Fires’, Alberto Manguel points out that the main reason for his Anthology was the fact that “the best untranslated books from Latin American countries had been written by women” and that they had been neglected by Europe and North America (Manguel 1986:3). Yet the most important voices of Latin American Literature were two women, the Mexican nun Sister Juana Ines de la Cruz and the Argentinian, Victoria Ocampo. Separated by three centuries, both of them attacked a society dominated by men and demanded for women’s rights. They articulated what was later voiced by Isabel Allende “Until the present (1936) we have principally heard from male witnesses concerning women... The woman herself has scarcely uttered a word” (Manguel 1986:6).
Testimonial writing in Latin America of the early 20th century was the voice of a number of women who used the genre to express their feelings about the atrocities committed by the colonizers. The testimonials of Latin American women are a counterpart to political speech translated into a maternal practice, a practice motivated by what Sara Ruddick calls ‘preservative love’ (Ruddick 1989). Political activity is spoken of alongside bearing and nurturing children in all the Latin American testimonials written by women. In Testimonial Writing, women become the conscience of the culture that they preserve. Their writings were a result of a ‘double consciousness’, as individuals and members of a community. On the other hand, Latin American women writers using the mode of Magical Realism, emphasized the need to voice their own anxieties and to discover themselves in a society which is structured around the male power and voices. They do not use the discourse of magic to escape from the real world and its problems but to focus on their creative, imaginative selves that is a part of their real lives as mothers, sisters, wives and daughters.

Women’s writing has been viewed as the angry discourse from the marginalized space that women occupy in all societies. This kind of perception has been for a long time the way theory has moved, climaxing with the powerful Gayathri Spivak’s essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Western Feminism has given the subaltern a space to speak in order to be transported to the symbolic order and stress the importance of equality. But it must not be assumed that this is the case with all cultures. de Zapata observes “our characters are not stereotypes, they are flesh-and-blood individuals endowed with free will. They can either take reality or leave it, escaping to an alternate reality giving greater scope to their fantasies” (de Zapata 2003: xvi). The Latin American women’s texts of Magical Realism give evidence of the fact that it is important now to look at women as members of a society who take part in all its dimensions and not just to fight against the patriarchal world. As individuals in a society, there are systems which marginalize both men and women. Latin American women writers
are as concerned with gender issues as with other hegemonic structures in society. Women writers have approached the Magical Realist mode in a poetic way because they exhibit a ‘heightened sense of reality’ (Leal 1995:123). This applies to women writers all over the world who spin the mode for more private and personal situations different from the deployment of the mode by the male voices who use the mode to focus on social, political and historical issues. In studying the magical realist stories by women writers from Latin America, the stereotypical approaches to women in Latin America are subverted. The focus on just gender issues ignores the more important issues that help readers view them as Latin Americans, ‘reading’ their world.

In the magical real stories by male writers, the women characters are placed in the background and portrayed in stereotypical roles as objects of men’s love and lust, as prostitutes, as maternal figures and other domestic roles. They provide the perfect backdrop for man’s exploits in the public domain- ‘a static backdrop of domestication and /or sexualisation”. (Aldama 2003:77). The use of the magical is seen through the eyes of these powerful male characters and what women writers bring into play is treated as “engendered magicorealism” (Aldama 2003:77) Hence it is important to explore how women writers employ the magical realist mode and how they “complicate novels (or stories) that one-dimensionalize Latina characters as objects to be penetrated and /or to be oppressively ornamented” (Aldama 2003:78)

Patricia Hart’s concept Magical Feminism, introduced in 1987, was coined to describe Isabelle Allende’s work. Her definition of Magical Feminism is Magical Realism used in a ‘femino-centric work.’ (Hart 30). This term adds more confusion to the already existing problems associated with ‘Magical Realism’ and further moves Magical Realism to a marginal space, away from the real world. Molly Monet-Viera studies the Post-Boom writers, both male and female, in a space which individualizes them and separates them from Magical
Realism as present during the Boom. The popularity of writers like Paulo Coelho, Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel goes beyond merely being magical realist; they, according to Monet-Viera, “highlight several cultural trends in both the production and consumption of Latin American Literature, namely the continued interest in magical and marvellous themes, the recent popularity in women’s writing and the impact of the processes of globalization on Literature” (Salenius 2009:12). This treats Post-Boom Literature as ‘spiritual fiction’ which once again caters to the consumer culture and undermines the intrinsic quality of the magical realist writing that comes from Latin America, especially the women writers. Women writers of the magical realist mode from Latin America use Magical Realism to describe the everyday reality of their lives. It is not used as a ruse to merely focus on fighting the system of patriarchy; it is a celebration of their lives in the social set-up that cannot be changed. These writers connect with the superstitious past of their mothers but they are now in the present with a supernatural bend of mind, grounded in reality. This is an important aspect of their writing before we tag them as expressions of a feminist approach. The Latin American woman writer, by using the magical realist mode, balances the power of the woman, her own world and her negotiation of the man’s world.

Critics speak of Magical Realism being the preferred mode for feminist discourse. Magical Realism already attacks the hegemonic power of realism and hence to attribute it to women writers’ call for equality in a male-dominated world becomes suitable. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris in their introduction to Magical Realism: Theory, History and Community say:

> Magical realist texts are subversive; their in-betweeness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and social
structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women.

(Zamora & Faris 1995:6)

These discussions make a case for the suitability of the mode for women writers to describe their experiences in a male-dominated world.

The Latin American woman allows the reader to enter into a ‘feminine space’ that is mysterious, encompassing experiences that uplift woman as an individual and not merely to contest the male-dominated world; the mysteries of being a mother, a wife, a daughter and an aunt are highlighted. The Latin American family revolves around the woman and the woman is an important figure in the society. The spaces within the house give rise to a number of relationships, with family and servants. They are not confining or limiting spaces; they allow for growth and knowledge. The everyday chores, that women participated in, are exposed in the texts without making them exotic; even the culinary experiences are ordinary and yet the processes of cooking bring the woman closer to the truths of her life.

Rosario Castellanos’ (from Mexico) ‘Culinary Lesson’ is a case in point. The description of the clean, white kitchen where the protagonist stands to make her husband a meal is compared to a sanatorium; it has a similar sterility as the hospital. But the protagonist/narrator accepts the fact “My place is here. From the beginning of time it has been here”(Castellanos 1990:40). She is clear about her place and the stereotypical image expected of her but she knows for a fact that she cannot and does not enjoy cooking. She is dependent on recipes and the instructions on food items- the written word. The protagonist’s ruminations of her husband, her marriage and her life synchronize with the cooking of the meat that she is preparing for her husband. She
knows that she must be the stereotypical wife, cook and lover that both her husband and society expect her to be. She begins by questioning why society expects that a young girl should know all about cooking by instinct. Her culinary skills are “limited to enunciations” (Castellanos 1990:41). As the meat reddens, she is reminded of the demands posed on her as an object to satisfy her husband’s sexual needs. Yet she is aware of the changes that has been brought about in her as an individual—“It’s true that in the contact or collision with him I have suffered a profound transformation; I didn’t know, and I know; I didn’t feel and I feel; I was not and I am”. This idea of becoming woman from child is an often used idea in the songs accompanying the Salsa dance as observed by Frances R. Aparicio in her essay “Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, Puerto Rican cultures.” Castellanos uses the image, taken from Popular music, to deconstruct the representation of Latin American woman. As Aparicio notes, while reading we are both ‘listening woman’ and ‘listening as a woman.’ These two processes make the reader look beyond the traditional patriarchal situation to a dynamic understanding of oneself.

The theory of cooking is juxtaposed with the theory of marriage. “The meat hasn’t disappeared. It has merely suffered a series of metamorphoses” (Castellanos 1990:48). So also her life but at the end, she is aware of the innumerable choices in front of her that nobody taught her, that she instinctively learned. The recognition of choices makes her strong and capable as a woman—“it has made a qualitative leap. It will go on operating at different levels: in my consciousness, in my memory, in my will, transforming me, determining me, establishing the direction of my future” (Castellanos 1990:48). The magical space of culinary enterprises becomes the feminine space where strength is derived and not just a space of anger. Women writers of the magical real stories use the motif of “Food specifically family cooking, a traditional female occupation... to empower women within the rigid limits
set by a patriarchal society. (Camacho-Gingerich 2012:33). The mode of Magical Realism is used not to set right what is wrong in society but to understand one’s capacity and strength as an individual. Truth has taken on a plurality which otherwise is seen as singular and absolute.

This form of plurality is associated with postmodernism. But for the Latin American woman, this plurality is intrinsic to her life that is lived on different levels. She is an important link in a society that revolves around feminine power; she is an icon of strength and the Latin American women writers recognize this intrinsic quality in her and create perfect representations of woman in Latin America. The magical realist mode is suitably used to re-create women in varied types of adventures in society as housewives, mothers, maiden aunts and prostitutes. These adventures become magical because they trespass the boundaries of the ordinary and enter a mystifying world, but always in touch with the everyday reality. They are rooted in Latin American culture. These stories are not focusing on supernatural happenings but the women characters travel to nonexistent places through the magical and take the readers along with them. These spaces are not necessarily physical but of the imagination; they belong to the everyday but get highlighted when seen through the magical.

Rosario Ferre’s ‘When Women Love Men’ juxtaposes a respected wife and a marginalized prostitute. The magical begins when the story-teller names the protagonists of her story Isabel- Isabel Luberza and Isabel la Negra- akin to a fractured self. Ambrosia was the link between the two and at his death, it was difficult to differentiate between the two. The esteemed wife and the outsider prostitute go through an alchemical process wherein the two keep their individual spaces and are merged into one. Ambrosia’s projects as an upper-class politician are a result of the conversations with both his wife and his prostitute lover. The agony that she faces as a jealous wife is taken to a different plane when she finds she needs to share the house with the prostitute. The contrasting natures and professions help each other to perfect their duties as housewife and prostitute.
It is the juxtaposition that adds strength to each others’ existence - the fragility of the upper class woman is placed against the raw sensuality of the prostitute but both are marginalised in the male-dominated world. The power of the story lies in the knowledge that both women get by being caught with the man who has the illusion of power in his hands. Isabel La Negra’s power lies in her ability to charm men and to teach them the art of love to prove that it is in succumbing to her magic that strength lies. The story brings out the inner strength of women. The wife is an adornment, cold and virtuous and the prostitute displays warm, potent sexuality. The wife belongs to the domestic space and the prostitute to the public space. The wisdom of the upper-class wife is no match to the native wisdom of the prostitute who is aware of the game of love and its intrinsic worth to the world of man. The binary positions held by the two women highlight the intuitive woman who uses the body and knows the power of instinct and imagination as against knowledge gained through the mind. The binary situation is not between man and woman, rather between woman/the other and woman/the other’s other. European upper-class upbringing is pitted against native wisdom that understands the body and its needs. The more Isabel Luberza follows her mother’s upbringing the more she creates a divide between her husband and herself. As the story unwinds, the white upper-class Isabel has to submit to the power of the sexual Isabel Le Negra, depicting the power of eroticism. Most stories ‘other’ the black and show the power of the dominant white but Ferre focuses on the power of the black and the magical realist mode portrays the competing truths that the contrasting pictures present. It is because of the presence of Isabel Le Negra that Isabel Luberza gets in touch with herself as a woman and moves out of the sterile place that made her a piece of decoration (Aparicio 1997). The two spaces held by the two women help readers to come in touch with the contradictions that lie within us. Ferre herself says in the essay ‘How I wrote ‘When Women Love Men’ “the apprenticeship of
the double-character, which implied for me a search into the double nature of my own conscience...to look at myself and at my own contradictions...it permitted me to listen carefully to my own narrative voice, which struggle to express on its own many conflicts which I had until then suppressed” (Ferre 1991:148).

Western women writers of the magical realist mode foreground the innate ability of women to be superstitious and magical in their imagination. Magic, by itself, is a transgression for the Western writer. But for the Latin American woman writer, it is a creation of her individualistic discourse by being in the real world. Her penchant to view the world in a magical manner is a part of her reality. Latin American women writers create characters and narrators who do not fit into the traditional mould of what society expects women to be. Yet at the same time their stories are not located in a primitivist space. These characters are in most part eccentric and imaginative but this eccentricity and imaginativeness is not the same as found in Western Literature. These characters in their rebellious and out of the ordinary behaviour display a number of alternatives for women in societies that are patriarchal. The stories by women writers in the magical realist mode do not depict women as passive and weak, using the magical to give expression to their freedom as women. As the story progresses, the characters adopt an independent posture within the system that is intrinsic to Latin America.

A sociological study, ‘Female and Male in Latin America’ edited by Ann. M. Pescatello discusses characteristic features of Latin American women, contrasting it with their Anglo-American counterparts. Woman as mother, as witch and as wife/Concubine are the three archetypes which represent ‘female role alternatives’ in Latin American society. The archetype of the witch is an important role in the culture of Latin America. She is a part of a society which depends on Shamans and other esoteric practices. Cultures that practice worship of the feminine power do not look suspiciously at the woman with supernatural
powers. Gabriel Weisz notes in the article “Subliminal Body: Shamanism, Ancient Theatre, and Ethnodrama” that “Women shamans are endowed with power and command respect within the community.” (Weisz 2000:209)

The stereotypical Witch is the ‘opposite of a good wife’ in Western cultures (Willem de Blecourt). They are women who are treated as outsiders by society as they spend their lives alone, away from the mainstream and they deconstruct the image of woman as the ‘Other’ by being outspoken and candid about challenging the accepted norms of society. The Church has looked down upon the concept of the witch in Western imagination. The Western woman, by introducing a witch, has subverted the idea of a good wife and the demands made by the institution of religion. Witches in the West are not divine; they break the gendered religion that they have to follow. The male-dominated religion that has no goddesses and feminine power makes the woman in society powerless and hence the Western women writers use these ‘marginalized’ women to express their anger at the patriarchal world, demanding equality. The representation of witches in Western cultural representations has shifted from evil women in the past to, to good witches in recent times, which again proves the inability of the West to accept different sources of knowledge. The good witches do not threaten the hegemonic order and are more acceptable to the patriarchal world. These witches are products of the Neopaganism which is a return to pre-Christian rituals and pagan practices. Witches are closely related to religion, and the history of Western religion begins with the notions that “Women were... responsible for mankind’s hasty and untimely exit from paradise” (Salenius 2009:26). The idea that woman is deceitful and causes disaster was further extended when in the ‘Iliad’ Homer makes Helen of Troy directly responsible for the Trojan War. Hence “witches are almost always described as deviants, as disorderly women who failed or refused to abide by the behavioural norms of their society.” ‘Witchcraft
discourse’ becomes the discourse that Western writers use to exoticize the power of woman
and to subvert the dominant male discourse (Salenius 2009:26-28)

Women participate very little in the power structure of the church; they become
members of groups that are not connected directly with the church. Western woman has
shifted from religion to spirituality and that religion is now called the New Age Religion and
it has based its ideas on the dissatisfaction with mainstream religion that had no room for
personal and spiritual development. Blecourt states that there is no autonomous female space
and that it is always defined by male authority. A study of the short story ‘Sophie and the
Angel’ by the Cuban writer Dora Alonso gives us a facet of how women deal with the male-
dominated religion of Catholicism in Latin America.

However much Christianity rules, there is an element of the superstition that cannot
be dismissed. So it is with Sophie. She has a ‘busy spiritual life’ and yet she gives in to her
primordial instinct of going back to the magical world of superstition both as an individual
and as belonging to a native culture (Alonso 1990:11). The Western hegemonic monotheistic
religion has come to stay in Latin America with the Iberian Conquest. But Latin American
culture cannot get away from the fact that the body and the spirit are one. The separation
demanded by the gendered religion of Christianity between the body and spirit is very
carefully subverted in the story. The sensual part of man that is embraced by native cultures
is privileged and try as much as she does, Sophie is unable to hide her longing to satisfy the
body against the spirit. Sophie is religious and yet keeps her identity within her body. This is
akin to the Latin American world accepting the Christian religion and preserving its
imaginative past. The men in the story are shadowy except for the priest who stands in the
way of connecting with oneself or one’s past.
The priest in the story talks of faith but his idea of faith is based on rationality and empirical theories. Sophie’s faith is more real and concrete; it finds its way to the concrete angel. The angel, shadowy as he is, is more real to Sophie than the priest from the church. The three men in the story represent three different traditions and historical situations in Latin America. The great grandfather and the seraphic lover belong to the origins of Latin America. The priest is an intruder; he came with the Conquest and has been able to create a loss of identity with one’s own roots. The Latin American woman has to stealthily deal with the desires of the flesh whereas in her culture, the shaman unifies both body and spirit. The angel and the feather disturb the sense of order so carefully and meticulously created by the priest and the Christian religion.

Magical Realism introduces the reader to alternate worldviews and alternate ways of being that is visible in this story. The story highlights the two ways of being, with the body and the mind, but they depend on each other for sustenance. Sophie’s story of the angel-lover is a point at which the priest needs to reconfigure himself and his assessment of the religion that he so proudly sermonises about. The angel is a part of the priest’s demography of the Christian religion; the priest cannot dismiss the angel as he could man or the devil. The angel is a concrete representation of the abstract religious ideas that he propounds to his parish; the angel has burst out of the labyrinth of religious ideas that he proposes to people. The story juxtaposes the new patriarchal organized religion with the old imaginative ways of faith.

The story ‘Sophie’s Angel’ introduces the reader to look at everyday reality from a different perspective that makes one restructure oneself and accept alternate views of life. The concept of faith and the role it plays in a person’s life is reanalyzed and reconfigured. At the end of the story, the reader questions the One Truth and its power over people, concealing the multiples views of truth.
Sophie’s Angel introduces one to a New Age Religion; this is unlike the religion promoted by realism where Christian views are privileged. In Magical Realism Christian views are maintained but magic and superstition are not trimmed out of this kind of religion. Hence the story does not create a binary between Christianity and Magic; on the other hand it embraces both, like the Western world did prior to the Age of Enlightenment. The hegemonic position of cold scientific explanations is subverted in the story and though the priest has proved the power of the church, it is the innate desire of man to go into the world of the inexplicable that becomes victorious when the feather, a sensual image, a body image, projects itself. Sophie uses pagan Catholicism which is “a more liberating, indigenous, female-identified faith” (Aldama 2003:83).

Magical realist texts of the Latin American world privilege the ‘ethic of care’ over the ‘ethic of justice’. The ‘ethic of care’ attributed to Carol Gilligan was introduced in the discipline of Psychology dealing with moral development. This moral theory, in the 1970s and 1980s challenged the theories of utilitarianism and deontologism. Annette. C. Baier gives the notion of the ‘ethic of care’ a philosophical approach when she stresses the fact that rational individualism has been a programme that has not taken into consideration the innumerable issues in society that highlight inequality. The ‘ethic of justice’ is presumptive in that it treats people as equal and misses the reality of situations in society. Eventhough emotions are as important as decisions taken with the rational approach, the ‘ethic of justice’ privileges rational control of behaviour. But Baier advocates a fine balance between the two ethics in order that the insights got from both men and women are taken seriously in the making up of a moral theory.

Realism is considered the authoritative discourse and Magical Realism rebels against its influence. Women characters that are powerful, pragmatic and intelligent in a rational way are privileged in the discourse of realism. Women who follow the ‘ethic of justice’ are more
important for the progress of society and hence women who focus on ‘the ethic of care’ are undermined. In the study of the magical real stories of the male voices, the accent has been on the men characters and hence the ability to see strength in purely feminine spaces is completely ignored. The binary between the ‘ethic of justice’ and the ‘ethic of care’ is subverted in a magical real story and the feminine space becomes one that uses both ethics in the knowledge of oneself and the world around. The ‘ethic of justice’ encourages an individualistic approach to life and disconnects with the people around as it refuses to pay attention to the emotional needs of humanity. The ‘ethic of care’ emphasizes the power of live relationships in contrast to the abstract theories of justice. Magical realist stories do not take to both extremes of a hegemonic hierarchical structure that puts the ethic of justice over the ethic of care. By encouraging a need to have both spaces, Magical Realism highlights the power of a ‘feminine space’. The study of Magical Realism demands that these two kinds of ‘ethic’ must be used to study the male and female characters in the stories.

The ‘ethic of care’, being a feminine space, allows women writers to bring the reader into the intimate space of care that is liberating for them to speak about themselves. It is not aimed at merely contesting the male-dominated world but gains its validity and strength by portraying the power of this private, emotional and care-centred space. This space cannot be marginalized and is as important as the public space that calls for responsibility and action.

Women writers of Latin America, in the Post-Boom period had already come into the public spaces that were earlier dominated by men. The magical real stories that they write aim at showing how private spaces can interact with the public spaces and make a difference in peoples’ lives. These writers are not asking that the feminine space of the ethic of care be replaced by the masculine ‘ethic of justice’. The ‘ethic of care’ is not a space that is pitted against the ethic of justice; on the other hand, it makes a demand of combining both the
feminine and masculine spaces in order to attain the balance and the harmony that a society requires.

Isabel Allende’s ‘Toad’s Mouth’ is a study of a woman who cares for men caught in a world of action that promises no benefits. They are the droves who work hard to make profits for the white owners of the sheep farm. The two spaces are merged in the games that the protagonist engages the men in. She is a prostitute, not afraid of her sensuality; she is not chastised by society as she helps and cares for the poor men who cannot find any other form of entertainment. Erik Camayd-Frexias observes in the essay ‘Narrative Primitivism in Latin America’ that “There is an important ludic element in primitive culture that has been lost to the modern” (Camayd-Frexias 2000:126).

The location of the story and the colonial exploitation referred to in the first paragraph of the story place the narrative in a ‘real’ world. But the situation in the story is given a ludic and magical touch. Allende’s story centres around the ‘games’ that a prostitute plays to keep her innumerable clients engaged and depicts her shrewd ability to “profit without cheating anyone” (Allende 1991:85). The ‘games of fantasy’ that Hermelinda plays has none of the vulgarity that prostitutes participate in. Sexual activity is treated in an indifferent manner that it does not carry with it all the guilt and moral views that the Church has prescribed to people. It is elevated to a level of beauty, magic and imagination when all the while she is partaking in the trade of the flesh. The story has all the ingredients of an oft-told story of a prostitute finding love and a home. But these ingredients, as Roh pointed out, when discussing Post-Expressionist Art, has a freshness with touches of the magical.

The story has undercurrents of the study of the rigid, monotonous, exploitative characteristics of the colonial masters. The life of the English is contrasted with that of the native droves. The English woman, who hides behind her hat and looks more like a man,
carrying a gun is pitted against Hermelinda who takes pleasure in exhibiting her female body and is compared to a Queen Bee, suggesting that she is as natural and spontaneous as nature—

“Hermelinda, in contrast, was a female they could see and count on, one with a heady mixture of blood in her veins and a hearty taste for a good time.” (Allende 1991:84)

The ‘illicit games’ that Hermelinda engages her clients in, like Blind Rooster, Swing and Toad’s Mouth, are no doubt all centred around the sexual act but gives her power over her clients. She designs the games to suit her and to make it extremely difficult for the men to possess her. The weary droves find the games in themselves exciting and accentuate the hunting instinct in man. The picture we get of Hermelinda is one of a woman who does not evince any despicable traits of a prostitute; she is not a seductress but a fighter. The Asturian, Pablo, is Hermelinda’s equal in that his hunting instincts match the games that she plays. It is a play of equals and it ends in success for both the players; loss and gain are not concepts which are absolute. It is the relative nature of success that makes the indigenous approach it differently.

The very games that gave the droves sexual pleasure are taken over by the dominant powers, first to continue them as entertainment for the subordinate culture but later to amuse themselves in times of boredom. The dominant English control the droves by giving them the entertainment they are used to though now it is legalized. In the hands of the English, the games lose their lustre, warmth, vivacity and energy.

The feminine spaces in native cultures like Latin American are powerful and yet stay within the traditional social construct that has been created by society. The spaces that wives, mothers, prostitutes and witches occupy retain the feminine and do not allow the masculine to encroach or override them. So it is with Hermalinda from Allende’s ‘Toad’s Mouth’. The prostitute’s space is not a lost space; on the other hand women get their power in them. These spaces resist the dominant views of such spaces and at the same time they accommodate the
views that dominant cultures have of them. Hernalinda’s desire to have a home and a husband fits in with the dominant views of the place of a woman in society.

Knowledge in these stories is the indigenous ways of learning which is not acceptable to the West as it cannot be quantified nor qualified in the same way as knowledge that is got from the West. It is knowledge that has been passed on from ancestors and so it is based on dreams, intuitions and eccentric behaviour. The core values that are portrayed in these stories stem from a society that has learnt from its ancestors. Even contesting patriarchal rules is indigenous in the sense that the option taken by women to fight loveless marriages and being treated as objects display a kind of strength that is native to Latin America.

In Rosario Ferre’s ‘The Youngest Doll’ dolls that take revenge and prawns that bite become the ‘objects’ of magic; these objects ‘palpitate’ with mystery and portray ‘convulsive life’ (Roh 1995:18). Ferre builds the story on associating the dolls to the girls. This narrative strategy results in the girls becoming unreal as the dolls progressively embrace the world of ‘reality’.

The maiden aunt sits on the porch in a rocking chair, making dolls. The angry prawn gets embedded in the aunt’s leg and she lives the rest of her life with it—an unreal situation seen from the point of view of the pragmatic world of science. Rosario Ferre transcends the boundaries between the real and the unreal when she creates these objects and exudes them with the power to live in the ‘real’ world. The mundane ‘dolls’ and ‘prawns’ are transformed to an extraordinary level of ‘magic’. The juxtaposition of the maiden aunt who makes dolls and the youngest niece who is a doll to her husband is elaborated when the aunt and the niece become one; the niece also exudes the same smell as her aunt. The revenge taken at the end is a combination of the images of the maiden aunt, the niece, the doll and the prawn.

Jean Franco’s Foreword to ‘The Youngest Doll’ explains that though Rosario Ferre belongs to the literary tradition of feminist writers like Virginia Woolf and Simone de
Beauvoir, “what finally allowed her to write was …a different voice, a vernacular voice, that of an aunt gossiping about a relative who had once manufactured monstrous dolls which she filled with honey”. The expression of anger is clearly placed in the traditional, vernacular, unscientific past of Latin America; it is a powerfully raw, instinctive response to a man’s ill-treatment of woman. But the revenge depicts the quiet strength of woman; a strength which far exceeds the Western analytical discussion of Feminist ideas.

Alina Camacho-Gingerich in the article, “In Search of the Feminine Voice: Feminist Discourse in Contemporary Latin American Literature” criticizes Patricia Meyer Spacks who in ‘The Female Imagination’ says that women writers have not been able to create powerful fictional protagonists and who find satisfaction in their personal accomplishments and actions. Camacho-Gingerich asserts that Isabel Allende has disproved this and has created powerful women protagonists. Herrmalinda in ‘Toad’s Mouth’ is an icon of strength and displays an enterprising feature that makes for success. By discounting moral issues, Allende presents basic human qualities in characters like Herrmalinda.

Latin American magical realist stories, written by women, fall into the category of the ‘neofeminist novel’. The emphasis is on the development of the woman/protagonist as a person more than her struggle against a male-dominate world. The stories focus on female strength and the influence women have by remaining in a female space even when they have to encounter the public space. Their stories are located in the experiences of their own ancestors, the women in their lives and the conversations they have as women. The characters that are portrayed go beyond the traditional Western stereotypes of both women and women of the developing countries. “Women cease to be the traditional pre-text of masculine discourse and instead become the text itself”. (Camacho-Gingerich 2012:32)

‘The Virgin’s Passion’ by Lucia Guerra, ‘The Youngest Doll’ by Rosario Ferre and ‘Sophie and the Angel’ by Dora Alonso are stories where the central characters are virgins
and maiden aunts. The stereotypical representation of these characters in Western discourse is negative, powerless women in society. It is the loneliness of their lives that become the focus of these representations. As they do not have immediate families to be a part of, they are dismissed as having no centre in their lives. But the maiden aunt in Latin American culture is commanding and occupies a significant position in the extended family especially where the mother is no more alive. She becomes the centre of the lives of the nieces and nephews and she lives vicariously through these children and this becomes the core of her life. She can take action against the ill-treatment of any of the nieces, as seen in Ferre’s ‘The Youngest Doll’. The maiden aunt is strong and bides her time to take revenge on the doctor who was responsible in ruining her life and later treating her niece as an object for the male gaze.

These maiden aunts are as much conscious of their physical needs as the other women in their lives. Sophie in ‘Sophie and the Angel’ finds a lover in an angel, which allows her to keep within the precincts of her innate piety. The story ‘The Virgin’s Passion’ uses the motif of Virgin Mary but goes beyond the spiritual image to a carnal image and brings about the completeness of human experience. Antuco introduces this maiden aunt to the mysterious world of love as a young girl and, since she does not marry, it remains a mystery all her life. She finally meets Antuco in her old age and loses her virginity as Sophie, an eighty year old virgin loses it to an angel. They are both unashamed of desires inspite of age and though to the Western consciousness, the feelings are out of proportion, the Latin American reality is inclusive of all experiences in life. These maiden aunts do not fit into the female stereotype. They control their own destinies (Camacho-Gingerich 2012).

The women characters in the magical real texts written by men are strong in a pragmatic manner; they have their feet on the ground and embrace the western discourse of realism. The best example of such a woman is Ursula in ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude’. In contrast women writers privilege imagination and the feminine space. The protagonists
created by women writers are both imaginative and powerful, and they dismiss the values that the male-dominated world expects of society. They are interested in fulfilling themselves not just as women but as human beings. The freedom that they attain is not just centred on fighting gender stereotypes. These stereotypes are interchangeable and do not get defined through one’s entire life. Hence Latin American women writers of the Magical Realist mode create women characters that are very active and make men into shadows that are passive. An observation made by Alina Camacho-Gingerich about Allende’s women characters can hold good for many women characters created by the women writers, that they are ‘androgynous’ (Camacho-Gingerich 2012:35).

The examples taken from the texts indicate that the feminine spaces created by the Latin American women are strong, not from a practical point of view but from a woman’s point of view. They are liberated in that they are happy being themselves, exhibiting powerful emotions that are innate in them. As Isabel Allende said in a speech made on 9 January 2008, that it is the heart that determines us and that her protagonists are strong, passionate women. When women are not aiming to be a part of the ‘symbolic’, their world finds expression in “a nourishing maternal space” (Ruddick 1989). This space finds its expression in the magical realist mode of women writers of Latin America. In Clarice Lispector’s ‘The Smallest Woman in the World’ the narrator is an ethnographer who takes the reader to the magical world of pygmies living in the jungle. The smallest woman draws out feelings that the explorer has not experienced in his journey as an explorer. He names her Little Flower and demonstrates the need for the European world to classify and categorize. Reactions to the picture of Little Flower vary from being patronizing to commenting on the ugliness of the creature-“It gives me the creeps” (Lispector 1973:449). The explorer believes he is helping the world with details of a people who are likely to be exterminated. The power of the explorer is undermined when Little Flower laughs at not being devoured unlike her
companions and when she is able to express her feelings for the man in her own words. Her laughter belongs to the ‘semiotic’, of the instinct that cannot be crushed nor can it be classified because it is born of ‘profound love’ which makes no distinction between the external or the internal man. There are no boundaries between her love for his boots, his ring and himself- “In the humidity of the forest these cruel refinements do not exist, and love is not to be eaten (to survive the forest), love is to find a boot pretty, love is like the strange colour of a man who isn’t black, is to laugh for love of a shiny ring” (Lispector 1973:453). The explorer cannot respond to this love; he is not familiar with it; it does not fit into the European life of coding, classification and categorization; it goes beyond description and yet strangely the whole Western imagination is geared to such a love- a love that makes no distinctions between the external and the internal being of man. Learning a few things about the tribe makes him feel superior to the object that he is studying. The most important secrets lie within the tribe and its individuals. It is the native woman who creates a dynamic space when she loves the explorer and gives in to her deep feelings without allowing the symbolic to suppress it.

The magical real stories, written by women, portray “eccentric, rebellious and imaginative characters who offer new alternatives for women in patriarchal societies” (Camacho-Gingerich 2012:35). These characters strive to fulfil themselves as human beings and not just as women, caught in a patriarchal world.
Works Cited:


