

**Magical realism as feminist discourse:  
Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and  
Shahrnush Parsipur's *Touba and the Meaning  
of Night***

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**Abstract**

Magical realist fiction is considered a subversive mode in its commingling of the binary opposition (Reason/Imagination) with none at the upper hand. Because of its transgressive spirit, from the mid-twentieth century onwards many postcolonial, cross-cultural, and feminist writers have found magical realism an appropriate means of giving voice to their seemingly improbable ideals. Of the above-mentioned groups, women novelists around the world have done their best to create a sort of female empowering discourse through this kind of double voiced narrative. Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and Shahrnush Parsipur's *Touba and the Meaning of Night* seem to be labors of this kind. The present paper is an attempt to answer two questions: (1) since their novels

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seem to emulate García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, do Allende and Parsipur really succeed in appropriating the work of the patriarch? (2) To what extent and in what ways Allende and Parsipur apply magical realist narrative techniques to express their protest against the status quo of women?

**Keywords:** Magical realism, feminism, *The House of the Spirits*, *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

## 1. Introduction

To put it simply, magical realism is the amalgamation of the realistic and the fantastic. It blurs the distinction between the two in a way that the real seems to be imaginary and the imaginary turns out to be real. In magical realist novels, fantastic events happen as if they are scenes of everyday life. This creates a sort of narrative, which distorts the conventionally immutable picture of reality, thus helping the author to reverse the hierarchical order in a subversive way and therefore, reshape the dominant hegemonies of society. In its deconstruction of current ideology, magical realism becomes a quest to voice the other(s) of the world. Women, who, according to feminist theorists, have traditionally been under the reign of patriarchal society, gain their voice in magical realistic novels. The mode, when enfolding feminist elements, becomes a tool for emancipation and empowerment of the seemingly weaker sex.

The works chosen belong to two Third World countries; one located in the Middle East, the other in Latin America. These countries have gone through turbulence and political instability during the 20th century. *The House of the Spirits* (1982) by Isabel Allende (b. 1942) and *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (1987) by Shahrnush Parsipur (b. 1946) are set against the critical conditions of 20th century Chile and Iran, respectively. The former pictures

an imaginary Latin American country – no doubt Chile – with its time span extending from the early years of the 20th century to Pinochet's military coup of 1973. The latter, located in Iran, starts from the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 and ends with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The women of these novels live in societies, which condemn them to have almost no possession of their own. Unlike men, they have no chance of getting to the higher stages of life. Therefore, they have to struggle, the best they can, against such systems of thought. The problems of women in such countries, compared to those living in the West, have been excruciating. In most Third World countries, women have had "to combat sexism in the form of deep-rooted local beliefs and practices, to do with class, caste, religion, and ethnic biases" (Walters, 2005, p. 118). Their struggle against such issues "has been combined with, and sometimes complicated by, a struggle for the establishment of democratic government and for the most basic freedoms" (p. 118). As a result of such oppression, a mystified narrative like magical realism, as Yavari (2006) argues, seems "to be the most fitting mode of expression for the political realities" of these countries (p. 349). Applying a universal feminist framework, Allende (2005) and Parsipur (2006b) use the mode to overthrow the reigning patriarchy and establish an androgynous society in which women possess the same voice(s) as men.

## **2. Discussion**

### **2.1. Magical Realism and Its Affinity with Feminism**

In 1925, in his discussion of Post-Expressionist painting, Franz Roh (1995) applied the term *Magischer Realismus* to contrast "the new post-expressionist style in painting, which emphasized sharply focused representation, in contrast to the near-abstractions of expressionism" (Faris, 2004, P. 65). Roh, who was the first to use the term for an artistic context, believed that Post-Expressionist painters while "reveal a new reverence for everyday life", at the same time, "retain the orientation of expressionism

toward a realm of the spirit" (p. 65). He actually meant "a text's *departure* from realism rather than its reengagement of it" in a sort of "a renewed delight in real objects" (p. 15). When talking about the word magic in the works of Post-Expressionist painters, Roh argues that "With the word "magic," as opposed to "mystic," I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (p. 16). His idea that Post-Expressionist pictures "offer us secret delights and intimate charms that the pure unifying idealism of abstract art never even imagined" (p. 30) is somehow in line with the Russian Formalists concept of defamiliarization. This is something, which is voiced later by Simpkins (1995):

To prevent an overwhelming sense of disbelief, magic realists present familiar things in unusual ways (flying carpets, Nabokovian butterflies, mass amnesia, and so on) to stress their innately magical properties. By doing this, magic realists use what the Russian Formalists called defamiliarization to radically emphasize common elements of reality, elements that are often present but have become virtually invisible because of their familiarity. (p. 150)

Years later the term magic realism, which had once been "pictorial in origin...became a widely used literary concept" (Guenther, 1995, p. 33) by the Cuban Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980). Considered, along with Guatemalan Nobel laureate, Miguel Angel Asturias (1899-1974), to have been the second great path makers of magical realism, Carpentier (1995) deems the marvelous real or *lo real maravilloso* as something inherent in the history of America. Europe, devastated by the project of the Enlightenment, has lost its vigor, its "magical evocative power" (p. 87); America, on the other hand, is "a virgin land... far from using up its wealth of mythologies" (p. 88):

I found the marvelous real at every turn ... I thought, the presence and vitality of this marvelous real was ... the heritage of all of America, where we have not yet begun to establish an inventory of our cosmogonies. The marvelous real is found at every stage in the

lives of men who inscribed dates in the history of the continent. (p. 87)

As Bowers (2004) argues, the Enlightenment "assumed (that) all truth could be known through logic and science without the need for the superstitions of religion" (p. 65). European Positivism resulted in "the centrality of reason which leads to the evacuation of *poiesis* from the concept of *mimesis*, thus deforming the Aristotelian notion by restricting subjectivity to the imitation of an external reality in accordance with the precepts of hegemonic rational paradigms" (Chandy, 1995, p. 125 ). The realism of the Enlightenment deprives art of its creative power, of its imagination. Magical realism, on the other hand, is "a particularly successful manifestation of *poiesis* as opposed to *mimesis*" (p. 126).

However, it was after the 1950s and particularly with García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) that the term *realism magico* came to mean a worldwide narrative fiction which is a mixture of the real and the fantastic. Here, García Márquez "interweaves...the national and the cosmopolitan, the local and the universal, the historical and the mythical" (Hart, 2006, p. 259). The international acclaim for *One Hundred Years of Solitude* made it the model for all those who wished to practice narrative strategies of magical realism. The mode, however, escapes –as it happens with other literary modes- any exact definition. Yet, critics have uttered some features common to almost all works written in this mode. For instance, Leal (1995) differentiates between magical realism and other modes of fantastic fiction:

Unlike superrealism, magical realism does not use dream motifs; neither does it distort reality or create imagined worlds, as writers of fantastic literature or science fiction do; nor does it emphasize psychological analysis of characters, since it doesn't try to find reasons for their actions or their inability to express themselves. Magical realism is not an aesthetic movement either, as was modernism, which was interested in creating works dominated by a refined style; neither is it interested in the creation of complex structures per se. (p. 121)

The above definition suggests that the fantastic events in magical realism –as opposed to Surrealism– are not merely psychological projections of characters' minds; rather, they really happen at least in the context of the novel. In order for such supernatural elements to be accepted by the reader, a text needs what Chandy (1982) calls "authorial reticence" (p. 180) or no explanation on the part of the author to explain for such fantastic phenomena. This is what Wendy B. Faris (2004) later calls an "irreducible element" or something magical that cannot be accounted for via the rules of logic and the laws of the universe, but is accepted by the reader "on the level of textual representation" as if it really happened in the text (pp. 7-8). The occurrence of this element alongside ordinary things- in a matter-of-fact way- is in part due to the locale of the story and the system of beliefs of that region: something magical which seems commonplace for a community may appear strange for another because of the gap in their systems of belief, folklore and mythology.

Another feature of this mode is that the magic incorporated in the narrative has to tell us "a deeper truth... outside the novel" (Hart, 1987, p. 22). In fact, it figuratively projects a reality about the state of affairs in the world of human beings. As a result, it helps the reader, through such amalgamation, to hold a new way of looking to his/her surrounding world and "re-evaluate what he has previously held to be real" (p. 22).

Moreover, in his/her portrayal of the surrounding world, "The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality (as the realists did) or to wound it (as the Surrealists did) but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things" (Leal, 1995, p. 123). And, while "the supernatural is portrayed in the traditional fantastic narrative... as unacceptable and threatening to the world of reason, magical realism... juxtaposes two worldviews without establishing a hierarchy between them, thus relativizing the dominant Western rational paradigm" (Chandy, 1995, p. 141).

This alternative approach towards seeing life and our surrounding world provides a view we have never held before.

"The use of magical realism creates new spaces, opportunities for subverting dominant structures, and the ability to search for a cultural and personal identity that is self-defined and as multifaceted as life itself" (Hatjakes, 2008, p. 20). Due to its hybrid, polyvocal narrative, verging on the deconstructive spirit of postmodern fiction, magical realism can be used as an empowering strategy for the female sex, which has traditionally been overshadowed by the patriarchal, rationalistic voice of the phallogocentric hegemony. "Magical realism is the re-spiritualization, re-mystification, and deconstruction of traditional narrative. Magical realists address the political, spiritual, ontological, social, and sexual aspects of life" (Hatjakes, 2008, p. 3). It merges the boundaries between the fantastic and the real and, as a result, blurs the dualistic opposition of reason and imagination in order to bring about some sort of equality between genders.

Talking about the feminist ideas of Helen Cixous, Maggie Ann Bowers (2004) argues that "patriarchal authority defines women by making all assumed female attributes negative as opposed to the positive male attributes" (p. 66). Such patriarchal authority, as Felman (1997) points out, because of its connection with superstition and imagination (as opposed to men's reason and rationalism), puts women's spirituality into a point of disadvantage (p. 13).

Feminist thinkers, on the other hand, re-evaluate this conventionally held view towards female spirituality and imagination: the fact that "women were the first beings worshipped as deities" in pre-historic times endows them "a unique link with divine power" (Mallory, 2008, p. 31). Universally these goddesses were bestowed with attributes like "love, death, creativity, the moon, and sexuality" which honored them with the concept of "mother earth" (p. 31). But men rebelled against the kingdom of women and confined them to the domestic realm. Now mortal women, who consider themselves to be heirs to those deities, are intent to recapture their lost domain from men. To reach their deconstructive goals, women novelists have tied their hands to use narrative as a place for female empowerment.

Yet, as Faris (2004) argues, "although we can discern certain common strategies between feminist issues and magical realist practices, magical realism is not a feminist genre" and, in spite of the fact that works of fiction concerned with the problems of women are abundant", there is no single definable feminist ideology that joins them" (p. 172). This implies that female magical realist novelists have attempted to link feminism and this mode of fiction by using a network of various feminist theories universally held to address the question of women.

## 2.2 A Narrative of Their Own

Critics have repeatedly discussed how García Márquez influenced Allende in writing her multi-generational novel, *The House of the Spirits*. "This is... the region and atmosphere of García Márquez and it has often been noted that Allende's *The House of the Spirits* owes a lot to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, including the use of a narrator who constructs the narrative from reclaimed books" (Bowers, 2004, p. 73). Antoni (1988) postulates the influence of García Márquez unavoidable for anyone who takes a fancy "to follow in the tradition of magical realism: How does one get beyond *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, since all writing in the genre would seem, in the end, a rewriting of this novel?" (para. 1) Allende herself accepts such inspiration and ironically compares herself to "a pirate who has boarded the ship of letters" (cited in Hart 2006, p. 270). However, Allende, claiming her own voice, succeeds in rewriting García Márquez and what she has done verges on an unconscious parody (Antoni, 1988, para. 1). "Allende's work is capable of shadowing, mimicking, and reversing the original form that is claimed to cast it" (Hatjakes 2008, p. 51). It is as though Allende unconsciously parodies García Márquez early in the novel, then stumbles happily onto her own language-her own story-in the end (Antoni, 1988). Antoni (1988) argues that gradually as we step forward in the narrative, a sort of feminine-collective voice subdues Esteban Trueba's masculine, authoritarian tone (para. 26). "Although magical events are presented in Allende's fiction with the same deadpan style as



in García Márquez's fiction, nevertheless, the whole idea is given a feminine twist" (Hart, 2006, p. 275). As a consequence, we feel that a feminine tradition of writing surfaces and goes alongside the masculine tradition of writing in Latin America (Antoni, 1988, para. 25). Thus doing, "Allende re-genders writing, magic, and storytelling in order to subvert the masculine self-procreation in *Cien años de soledad* (shown in the males' dominance over the creation of the word and the narrative's following of the Buendia family through the patrilineal history)" (Hatjakes, 2008, p. 69). Hatjakes (2008) argues that Allende's appropriation of Garciamarquan style has often been criticized as an inferior imitation due to "the fact that within a Western patriarchal culture, only men are entitled to be the keepers of cultural reproduction" (p. 52).

Charges against Parsipur's *Touba and the Meaning of Night* were not as harsh as those against Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, but her style has sometimes been considered a flawed imitation of the patriarch. Like Allende, Parsipur, inspired by García Márquez, creates an epic novel, a family saga of three generations of women in order to create a new consciousness for her sex: "Parsipur, inclined to Garciamarquan magical realism, blends history and supernatural upon a setting of mysticism and mythology to finally find peace in returning to the roots, to the nature" (Mirabedini, 1997, p. 1118). Mirabedini (1997) claims that Parsipur's novel has failed to describe the mythic and the real worlds of the novel with distinct proper languages:

The novel is split; even if we eliminate the mythic part, there would be no damage to the totality of the story, because this part fails to integrate with the events and the characters of the real part of the novel. This is in some part due to the weakness of the language of the work. Parsipur narrates both worlds of her novel with an analytic language ignoring the fact that describing the magical atmosphere needs a language which is poetic and imaginative. (p. 1121)

Mirabedini (1997) goes further and claims that the last scene of the novel, in which Touba and Layla travel through the roots of the pomegranate tree to the depths of the earth, as useless and nonessential for the plot of the story:

Parsipur, anxious to propagate her mystic thoughts, takes Touba along with Layla— the combination of innocence and prostitution— from the garden to the heart of nature through the roots of the pomegranate tree to show that Touba's ascension is in her death and going to the depth of nature. The last pages of the novel are non-essential in that they want to narrate the role of woman in civilization and tell the reader that Touba and Layla are just allegorical characters. Nothing would be of avail in the last 10-15 pages if the novel has failed in the previous events to demonstrate this. (p. 1124)

This seems not to have emanated from an impartial viewpoint. In fact, female writers, regardless of their geography, have suffered from an epidemic called artistic denial. Russ (1997) enumerates some remarks by male reviewers when facing a work by a female writer:

She didn't write it.  
 She wrote it but she shouldn't have.  
 She wrote it, but look what she wrote about.  
 She wrote it, but "she" isn't really an artist and "it" isn't really serious, of the right genre— i. e., really art.  
 She wrote it, but she wrote only one of it.  
 She wrote it, but it's only interesting / included in the canon for limited reason.  
 She wrote it, but there are very few of her. (p. 97)

In their famous essay, *Infection in the Sentence*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1997) argue that Bloom's anxiety of influence, more than being a neutral theory of literature, is an exclusively male-dominated concept. They prefer the term "anxiety of authorship" as fitted for women writers because of two reasons: "on the one hand ... the woman writer's male precursors symbolize authority; on the other hand, despite their authority,

they fail to define the ways in which she experiences her own identity as a writer" (p. 23). Such anxiety results from the female writer's "radical fear that she cannot create... [and] ... because she can never become a precursor, the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (p. 23). Anxiety of authorship paralyzes women writers in that it instills a sort of inferiority on the side of the patriarchs of literature on their female descendants (p. 25). Thus, unlike the male writer who battles his precursor, the female author must be in search of a female predecessor not to rival her, but actually as a source of inspiration, or an epitome of survival, who instills the idea that the patriarchal culture would be overthrown and creativity for women is possible (p. 24).

To accomplish this purpose, women writers require an originally feminine tradition of storytelling, which gives them a voice of their own. Gabriel García Márquez, the seemingly original model of magical realism, has often confessed to the fact that his style of narration is a gift of his grandmother (Hart, p. 2006). In fact, magical realism has its origins in *The One Thousand and One Nights*, and the art of Scheherazade as a female narrative voice:

...the *One Thousand and One Nights* and other Persian folk tales, in which flying carpets roam the skies, whales grow as large as islands, and birds converse in many languages, are often acknowledged by critics and by novelists, including Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Italo Calvino, as the forbearers of magical realism- or rather, "marvelous reality," as the original Spanish signifiers. Crossing the borders between "magic" and "real", and blending the natural environment with supernatural events, have allowed the composers of these narratives to highlight the magical wonders of Persian "reality" throughout the centuries. (Yavari, 2006, pp. 349-350)

The acknowledged indebtedness of the founding fathers of magical realism to a female story teller is to the advantage of both Allende and Parsipur since they can claim that this mode of fiction is originally feminine and therefore, reclaim their lost heritage.

Parsipur, as a Persian female novelist, emulates a predecessor, namely Scheherazade, who has endowed her with a legacy of marvelous reality rooted in Persian literature: "The readers of Parsipur's fiction, much like the readers of *One Thousand and One Nights* who are accustomed to mixtures of fantasy and reality, do not hesitate to accept the simultaneous presence of the supernatural and natural events in her stories" (Yavari, 2006, p. 350). On the other hand, Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, as a "critique to the barbarity of Pinochet's Chilean regime", is reminiscent of Scheherazade due to the fact that "even though she [Scheherazade] narrated for her own life, she had the eventual welfare of her state on her shoulders as well, and her efforts liberated her country from the tyranny of King Shariyar's rule" (Faris, 1995, p.180).

### 2.3 Magic as Feminine Prerogative

Magic is an exclusively feminine realm both in *The House of the Spirits* and *Touba and the Meaning of Night*. In *The House of the Spirits*, Clara, a clairvoyant child who converses with spirits and possesses telekinetic powers to move objects, is the central character:

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

Clara is "a rather eccentric creature not particularly well suited to the duties of marriage and domestic life" (p. 105). She has "no interest in domestic matters" (p. 149) and is so preoccupied with a world of her own that she seems to be "as distracted and smiling" as "in everything else; relaxed and simple, but absent" (p. 150). Clara is the first of the three generations of women to come, the

next two being Blanca and Alba. "Her predictions", however, "are ignored and her visions result in nothing more than the reaffirmation of her subjugation as a female" (Hatjakes, 2008, p. 60). Even her nanny "believes that her magical abilities will come to an end when her womanhood begins" (Allende, 2005, p. 60.). However, Clara's supernatural powers increase when she becomes a woman who accepts domestic responsibilities.

Patricia Hart (1987) argues that clairvoyance is of no avail to Clara since it reveals a sort of determinism (p. 47); that is, her magical power is of no help to her since she can merely predict what will happen without being able to change fate. This is something which is reiterated later by another critic:

Even though Allende, a feminist Robin Hood, robs the powers of reproduction and magic from richly powerful men (as they are represented in García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*), and gives them to the power-poor women, she cannot fully liberate them from the rule of social structures whose strictures suffocate this magical flame and ultimately extinguish it. (Hatjakes, 2008, p. 53)

Faris (2004), on the other hand, rejects the idea insisting that "magic is generally an empowering strategy if not a pragmatic one; thus it diminishes in frequency as political activity increases but it is also a precursor of that activity because it has helped Clara to survive and pass on her strength to her granddaughter" (p. 183).

While Hart (1987) argues that since "clairvoyance is a metaphor for female passivity, then it is essential that this magic diminish gradually and finally be replaced by something better by Alba's generation... to accept the responsibility for the world in which they live" (p. 59), magic does not disappear with Alba. To tell the truth, Allende begins her narrative with magic, and gradually shifts to real as if to say that the power of magic must be accompanied by the realities of life to liberate women. As a result of Clara's passivity, she is replaced first with Blanca and finally, Alba, whose prerogative over her grandma is her mingling of

magic and political reality. Unlike her grandmother, Alba is a political activist who uses Clara's manuscripts to reclaim past.

Alba takes off where Clara and Don Esteban leave, connecting both worlds to move on, survive and endure, no matter what. Having collected everyone's stories by weaving a tapestry of the political and personal history of Chile, Alba and her country earn a much deserved hopeful future that becomes all-inclusive. (Mallory, 2008, p. 142)

Fantastic imagery also resides with women. It is in the body of Clara's mermaid sister, Rosa the Beautiful "with her incredible green hair... her fairy-tale manner, and her special way of moving as if she were flying" (p. 31) that we find a creature half-human, half myth:

The tone of her skin, with its soft bluish lights, and of her hair, as well as her slow movements and silent character, all made one think of some inhabitant of the sea. There was something of the fish to her...but her two legs placed her squarely on the tenuous line between a human being and a creature of myth. (p. 11)

Magic, on the other hand, is unattainable for the men of *The House of the Spirits* especially Esteban Trueba, the *patron*. "Don Esteban, with his elitist, colonialist, and fascist approach to life, signifies cold, harsh, unrelenting reality" (Mallory, 2008, p. 125). He deems magic "like cooking and religion" an exclusively "feminine affair" (Allende, 2005, p. 158). Unable to understand the reality of the magic, Esteban stubbornly believes that there is "clearly need for a man among so many hysterical women" (p. 133). Trueba, patriarchy incarnate, seems to be unable to understand women's fantastic abilities. He calls them "hysterical" and "mad", labels applied to women who do not conform to principles of mental health in the phallogocentric cultures. According to Shoshana Felman (1997), Hysteria "is a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration" (p. 8). In *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, Touba's mad aunt (Persian aunt) who wants to climb a rope of light, and

Ismael's retarded mother (Turkish aunt) signify women never given opportunities to express themselves.

But magic has its working on Don Esteban. When he kicks her sister, Fèrula, out of his house, she sets her curse on him and says: "You will always be alone! Your body and soul will shrivel up and you'll die like a dog" (Allende, 2005, p. 154)! While Esteban attempts to rationalize her shrinking body by invoking to scientific reasons, Alba, when looking at the end of the novel on a photo of her "grandfather when he was young and six feet tall", finds it an "irrefutable proof that Fèrula's curse came true and his body shrank in the same proportions as his soul" (p. 485). The sudden death of Prince Feraydun Mirza, Touba's fascist polygamous husband, who has been ignored totally by Touba after his second marriage, seems to have something to do with the power of magic: "Who would have believed that the healthy Prince Feraydun would die" of a "heart attack?" (Parsipur, 2006b, p. 189) Parsipur narrates his death as if it is the working of some vengeful goddess.

Like Clara, the title character of *Touba and the Meaning of Night* possesses extraordinary powers. Touba's fantastic beauty, with "her long golden hair and her Venus-like body" (p. 43), is reminiscent of Rosa the Beautiful. Touba can converse with the dead and perform clairvoyant abilities. She owns a house haunted by the spirit of a young girl, Setareh, who was raped and made pregnant by some Cossack soldier during the turbulent years of the Constitutional Revolution, then murdered by her own uncle, and finally buried under the pomegranate tree to avoid bad reputation. The spirit of Setareh seems all too human: "The fourteen year old Setareh walked up and down in the yard, went to the cellar washbasin to look at the shadow of her own body, then sat on the steps in sorrow. Whenever Touba asked her a question, she gave her the answer" (p. 195).

Parsipur includes scenes of magic as if they are parts of everyday life. "By shuttling back and forth between past and present, between real and magic, by refusing to give either the upper hand, her technique questions and subverts traditional oppositions and hierarchies and challenges to dissolve them" (Yavari, 2006, p. 350-351). Touba's conversation with the spirit of

Setareh and the way the latter transitorily empowers the former with clairvoyant abilities occur as if they form parts of everyday reality:

Touba asked Setareh if Manzar O-Saltaneh would bear a boy or a girl. Setareh responded that she would search in the uterus. Shortly afterward she returned and said that the baby was a girl. Touba told Manzar O-Saltaneh that she would have a baby girl, and when she did bear a girl, all the family and friends were amazed. Touba predicted that Tabandeh, on the other hand would bear a boy and, indeed, she did. Touba also predicted that in the affairs of the world there would be bad news, that there would be war. And soon people were talking about the Spanish civil war. Little by little, Touba began to be treated with respect as a seer ... (pp. 194-195)

The presence of the spirits in magical realist novels suggests a sort of defocalized narrative which portrays parallel worlds of the real (visible) and the impossible (invisible) (Faris, 2004, p. 68). The spirit of Setareh signifies the marginalized who really exist but are never seen. It is here that the magical figuratively represents the real. Touba who, unlike Clara, remains alive nearly to the end of the novel, is followed in the next two generations by Moones (Blanca's counterpart) and her adopted daughter, Maryam (Alba's counterpart). Somehow contrary to Allende, Parsuipur begins with real and continues with magic, then undercuts the fantastic by scenes of stark reality only to invoke to magic at the end as an ideal way of liberating her sex.

Like Alba, Maryam lacks the magical side of the women of previous generations. She is a political activist who one day leaves the house to accompany her future husband and then comes back pregnant with a revolver in her hand to have her dying moments in the arms of her adopted father. Since Parsipur finds the character of Maryam insufficient to be an ideal picture of modern Persian woman, she includes Layla, the ethereal woman, the magical key to emancipate women:

I have taken Leila from the myth Lalita, which is also a myth from the region. The story of the journey of the Sumerian goddess Inanna



into the underground world, which was reflected later in the Babylonian and Assyrian myth of the goddess Ishtar, is another basis for the formation of the characters Leila and Touba. (Parsipur, 2006a, para. 10 )

Parsipur needs Layla as a liberated version of Touba to give a new feminine consciousness to Persian Women. "By clothing Layla in archetypal imagery, Parsipur sheds light on the dark landscape of the feminine sphere of Persian culture, offering new venues for political and cultural liberation. Layla's connection to the realm of the underworld surfaces in the final pages of the novel and the last moments of Touba's life" (Yavari, 2006, p. 353).

Layla, an ethereal woman who epitomizes the unconscious female self of her husband, Prince Gil, is not that traditionally submissive, destined woman. She wants herself to be an equal. Parsipur (2006b) knows that such archetypal image needs to be timeless. As a result, time loses its essence and becomes both linear and circular:

Prince Gil asked: "Layla, how old are you?" The woman, who had stepped toward Touba and was pressing on her shoulder to invite her to sit down, replied, "One year." The prince insisted, "No, no, I mean your other age." She laughed, "Ten thousand years!" and threw her shoulders up. "No, no, that is too much, you were never so old." "Seven thousand years," she reported. Prince Gil said, "No this is too little," provoking the reply, "I am not yet born," to which he responded, "This is too much." (p. 81)

In the last scene of the novel, which turns out to be a magical journey through the roots of the pomegranate tree to the underworld, hand in hand with Touba, Layla moves underneath, narrating her own story- which is actually the story of the female sex- and the way men tried to enslave her, but all in vain. Touba dies and Layla, the epitome of free love, replaces her in the new Iran.

## Magical realism as feminist discourse

Touba asked, "Am I dead?"

Layla said, "You are dead."

Touba asked, "You too?"

The response was, "I can not die."

Touba asked, "The prince?"

Layla answered, "He also can not die" (Parsipur, 2006b, p. 338)

#### 2.4 Towards a Male-resistant Discourse

At the end of her famous essay, *Women and Madness: the critical phallacy*, that Shoshana Felman (1997) figures out that the only way for women today is to "re-invent" a discourse "to speak not only against, but outside of the specular phallogocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning" (p. 20).

As discussed earlier, both Allende and Parsipur applied Garciamarquiian style when writing their fiction. They had to liberate themselves from the chains of a male predecessor. While invoking to magic, as opposed to real, could help them voice the others of their home countries, they had to create their own feminine worlds in their novels. As a result, both went their own ways in order to centralize the ex-centric. In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende invokes to a sort of double-voiced narrative in which "Esteban Trueba's recollections are ... intercalated within the overriding feminine narrative" as a means of overthrowing the masculine/feminine opposition (Hart, 2006, p. 275).

Also, "The role of the Archive" in *The House of the Spirits* "is fulfilled by the notebooks produced as a labor of love by a dynasty of tough-minded women. By using Clara's notebooks, Alba in effect reconstructs the untold story of women's oppression in Latin America" (Hart, 2006, p. 279). It is Clara who records even "trivialities... never suspecting that fifty years later" Alba invokes to "her notebooks to reclaim the past and overcome" her terrors (Allende, 2005, p. 7). Furthermore, she "is able to reformulate her female characters into actual human beings, rather than personifications of the expectations held by the *machista* patriarchal figures" (Hatjakes, 2008, p. 4). Thus, while portraying her female characters "in the Ave/Eve tradition" (Hatjakes, 2008,

p. 4), Allende endows them qualities that are in sharp contrast to those portrayed in Chilean patriarchal system. Clara, "an otherworldly mother figure" (p. 80), who stands for the Virgin Mary, plays the same role in Alba's salvation as Transito Soto, the prostitute of the Red Lantern, the difference being that the former gives Alba "Spiritual" but the latter gives her "physical freedom" (p. 80). Of course, "their actions are often limited by the patriarchal strictures of their society", but "Allende gives depth, complexity, voice, and agency to her female characters through their appearance as permutations and inversions of the Ave/Eva duality" (p. 80).

While some critics (like Patricia Hart) doubt whether Allende can be called a genuine feminist, everybody simply admits Parsipur's feminism. Parsipur's fiction, according to Narges Bagheri (2008), is female-centered: from the beginning to the end of her novels, she portrays women who struggle to find their lost identities (p. 134). In *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, Parsipur digs the archives to discover the reality of womanhood. "The myth of woman" invented by the dominant patriarchal culture as something essential, "opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless" (Beauvoir, 1974, pp. 282-283). Therefore, Parsipur has no alternative but to uncover a new image of woman: "The creation myth in the Sumerian narrative, which is the killings of Apsu and Tiyamat, the pre-existent male- and femaleness, was the basis for the formation of some of the characters of this book" (Parsipur, 2006a, para. 10). Touba, taken from Qur'an, is the name of a tree in Paradise, a tree which offers all sorts of fruit one could imagine. She is born during the years leading to the Constitutional Revolution. Her father, an absolute patriarch, has come to a new understanding of women: "They think. Unfortunately, they think. Not like the ants nor like the minute parts of a tree, nor like the particles of dust, but more or less as I do" (Parsipur, 2006b, p. 13). He concludes that: "Yes, the earth is round. Women think. And soon they have no shame" (p. 13). He believes that soon "Everything would then be chaos" (p. 14). Touba is in search of Truth, a word which is synonymous with the concept of God. Her husband, Feraydun Mirza, feels

"uncomfortable about a woman learning the secrets of Truth (p. 103). Truth, however, evades her again and again as if never to be obtained through human contact. She invokes to nationalism and Mr. Khiabani, a radical cleric of the Constitutional Revolution, a spiritual man who is beyond the realm of ordinary human beings, as a source of inspiration; she invokes to Sufism and Master Geda Alisha, to find truth but all in vain. Certainly men of are no avail in her quest to find the Truth. Thus, it is only through her journey underworld with Leyla that she discovers Truth. Here Touba, the angel in the house, is contrasted with Leyla, an archetypal figure taken from the archives of the Middle East (Sumerian mythology) to narrate hersotry. Therefore, the angel/whore dichotomy appears to question patriarchy's system of mythology. In the so-called journey underworld, Layla tells Touba:

They (men) prostituted me in order to dominate you and you slapped the faces of your other daughters to warn them of their fearful fates and of the danger of becoming like me. Touba, I took your hatred to my heart. I no longer danced as the waves of the sea, nor as the wind in the branches, nor even like the law of union between the earth and the sky. I only moved enough to keep them calm...I had been separated from my pure roots and defiled. (p. 335)

Layla, the image of purity, frightens her husband, Prince Gil, whenever she goes "back to her real, untouched, pure self" (p. 329). It is after this epiphanic journey that Touba becomes someone else who no longer has the need to search for truth (p. 337). Prince Gil, whose name is suggestive of the title hero of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, has his mansion in the realm of dreams. Gil himself incarnates man's unconscious desire to objectify and suppress Layla. Moving back and forth in history, he is a timeless figure with no home to live in. The character of Gil, taken from the hero of Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal* (1946), Raimon Fosca, a man cursed to live forever, reminds us of the old man in *The Blind Owl* by Sadeq Hedayat (Mirabedini, 1997, p. 1121). Like Esteban Trueba, Gil, whenever encounters "peasant girls by the springs... mixes with them and after satisfying"

himself, kills them (Parsipur, 2006b, p. 118). He seems to be the incarnation of death. While Gilgamesh was mortal, in *Touba and the Meaning of Night* he becomes "eternal and is as though it was written just yesterday" (Parsipur, 2006a, para. 10). He has survived political upheavals by killing lots of innocent people. Prince Gil is the only male character who is given space to narrate his story. It is here that Gil, transgressing boundaries of time and place, narrates his wildly adventurous life, which verges on one man's crusade against the female sex. Touba, the static image of womanhood, cannot remember the face of Prince due to the fact that Gil, as the mythical image of the opposite sex, has been able to reformulate himself again and again to subjugate her:

... He seemed like a lion in the depths of a dark forest. She wondered whether or not she had met the prince prior to these times. The prince's face seemed attached to some ancient memory, but she could not focus well enough to recall it. (Parsipur, 2006b, p. 125)

### 3. Conclusion

Isabel Allende and Shahrnush Parsipur had two major preoccupations when writing their novels: first, to emulate their male predecessor, Gabriel García Márquez, in a way to have their independently feminine voice while inspired by his style; and second, to centralize, in their narrative, a sex that has traditionally been marginalized. To reach these goals they have taken their own ways.

Allende's narrative is double-voiced with the female sex at the upper hand. Besides, she unconsciously (and sometimes consciously) parodies *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as an attempt to go beyond García Márquez, or at least, to have her distinct voice. In doing so, she re-genders magic and clairvoyance, empowers her sex by giving women the right of naming children and story-telling, and then, modifies the mutations of the Ave/Eva or virgin/whore dichotomy (Hatjakes, 2008, p. 54). Magic, however, is undermined in the second part of

the novel but it does not fade out. While Patricia Hart (1987) argues that "the novel consistently undercuts the importance of magical events portrayed, and leans over more strongly toward human solutions to mankind's problem" (p. 237), Allende seems to be in love with magic since she finds it as an invisible foundation to liberate the female sex. Hart goes even further and puts the "feminist twist" of the novel "in doubt" (p. 235). It seems, however, that Allende had in mind Emily Dickinson's famous poetic line when she was writing her novel: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" (Lehman, 2006, p. 182).

Parsipur, on the other hand, includes magic even in the last scene of her novel as a veiled strategy to liberate her sex. By emulating Scheherazade as her female predecessor, she uses a defocalized narrative in which time, place, and identity lose their essences. Reality and myth coexist in a way that we can never make distinctions. In her inclusion of Sufism, nationalism and, Persian history, and in her intertextuality with *The Blind Owl*, she gives us a Persian mode of García Márquez. At the same time, Parsipur is heavily influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Compared to Allende, her feminist twist is more obvious, something that resembles her novel to a feminist manifesto.

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