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Magical Realism in Ferré's "Amalia"

As a writer from Puerto Rico, Rosario Ferré is a prototypical figure of a dualistic conception of identity. As a site of external dominance, Puerto Rico has--and continues to have--struggles with national identity. As Jean Franco explains, "The problems of Puerto Rican identity have been compounded by its anomalous situation as a commonwealth...[not] being fully integrated as a state nor fully autonomous" (Franco ix). The relationship between native Puerto Rican culture and the United States is complex, and the tension is not only played out in the magical realist plots of Ferré's works, but her works show the importance of magical realism as an aesthetic for advancing the values of colonized groups. "Amalia" captures the tension between the dominant culture and the colonized culture, and using a combination of the magical and the real, Ferré is able to assert the importance of the colonized culture. She does so by working from the perspective of the dominant cultural narrative in the form of a young girl who interacts with both cultural perspectives and experiences the magical as a way of dealing with the disjointed identity.

Wendy Faris offers clear definitions of magical realism, but in the introduction to her book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, she also explains its significance to world literature. She concisely explains magical realism by saying, "Very briefly defined, magical realism combines realism and the

fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them” (1). Faris also suggests that the popularity of magical realism is closely tied to its ability to challenge dominant cultural narratives. She writes, “Magical realism has become so important as a mode of expression ...within its texts, marginal voices, submerged traditions, and emergent literatures have developed and created masterpieces” (1). Not only is magical realism a popular method for expression, it allows an opportunity to address the concerns of globalization and multiculturalism in ways that realism or other traditional aesthetics cannot. The prevalence of magical realism in the Americas may be directly related to this possibility; Faris explains, “That destabilization of a dominant form means that it has served as a particularly effective decolonizing agent” (1). With the prevalence of colonial influence amongst the Americas, the ability to subvert the dominant form of narration while inserting marginalized cultural values and perspectives makes magical realism a powerful tool for liberation.

Ferré’s “Amalia” captures the tension between colonial and marginalized perspectives by employing magical realism. The first line is suggestive of the tension between cultures, and draws attention to the significance of the struggle. The story starts, “At last I am inside the forbidden garden and I can be myself” (47). By drawing attention to a forbidden garden, the story could be drawing an allusion to the garden of Eden. Still, the story is narrated by the title character, and the forbidden nature of the garden has many additional meanings. While the girl is forbidden from going outside due to her health condition, she is also forbidden from access to Puerto Rico. Within the house, Amalia has all of the luxuries of the United States’ cultural influence, and by not

being allowed to leave the house, Amalia is prevented from the influences of the local population. The tension is still allowed to play out, however, because of the reliance on local individuals for day to day operations within the estate. The isolation is incomplete.

Gabriel becomes an attractive figure for Amalia as a figure that represents the opposite of what her uncle expects of her. The juxtaposition of the two male figures in the young girl's life is a parallel to the relationship between the dominant culture and the marginalized culture. When Gabriel is introduced, he is "a slave to their whims" (50). When the uncle takes residence in the large home, Gabriel comes as "his chauffeur" (50), a subservient role. As the girl grows close to Gabriel while rejecting the incestuous advances of the uncle, the tension between colonial culture and colonized culture plays out. The inappropriate advances and controlling nature of the uncle corresponds with the inappropriate, incestuous, tendencies of a colonial power that attempt to maintain control and cultural purity.

The way in which the young girl plays with the dolls at the beginning, and as the story progresses, continues to reinforce the tension between cultural isolation and a freedom to explore and mix. Early in the story, the young girl provides each of the characters with isolated spaces, "in each floor the lodger could do as she wished, but she could under no circumstance visit the other floors" (53). Each doll having a designated space is a similar restriction to that placed on the young girl. She is not only confined to the house, but she is confined by the expectations of her uncle to be loyal and to avoid becoming familiar with Gabriel. The rule breaks down for both girl and dolls through the ongoing presence of Gabriel. The invasive presence is clear when the narrator explains, "Gabriel had dared to take Amalia out of her box...From then on

Amalia could come and go through the sideboard's galleries as freely as she wished" (54). The agency ascribed to the Amalia doll is similar to the agency the girl seeks throughout the narrative: the freedom to come and go and to socialize as she pleases. By conflating her self-identity with the doll, the young girl begins to experience a sense of liberation from the uncle.

The dolls in the story are given special significance through the use of magic as they are imbued with agency, and at times the doll referred to as Amalia narrates the story. The distinction between the young girl, Amalia, and her doll which she refers to as Amalia fades away during the story. The distinction between the two is challenged early in the story as the young girl reflects on the events by saying, "one of the maids found me...lying on the ground like a rag doll" (47). The image foreshadows the events of the narrative, and suggests that the girl has a dangerous understanding of her own identity. The girl finds herself identifying with the forbidden: the external world, the marginalized culture, and the inanimate figures of play. Strengthening the relationship between the doll and the young girl, the narrative shows how each undergoes similar torment, as might be expected with Voodoo. The end of the story blends the two characters as the young girl as narrator explains, "Then I walked slowly to the middle of the garden and took Amalia in my arms and began to rock her. I rocked you for a long time trying to protect you from the heat with my own body as you slowly began to melt" (58). The use of vague pronouns creates an ambiguous relationship between the doll and the girl. It is unclear who is protecting who from the heat, since both are in effect melting. The young girl's health condition makes the comparison between the doll melting and the girl's adverse reaction to the sun similar.

The climactic ending of the story is, in a sense, a cleansing, or breaking away for the colonized figures of the girl, Gabriel, and the Puerto Rican culture. The house burning down acts as an analogue to the destruction of a dominant national identity or a rejection of domination by a colonial influence. Lindsay Claire draws attention to this parallel when she writes, “The ‘conventional’ type of nation is even razed to the ground in her version of ‘Amalia’ when the protagonist and her accomplices destroy the uncle’s house in flames at the end of the story” (17). The inability of the uncle to accept the influence of Puerto Rican culture proves fatal, and the story acts as a warning. Colonial powers cannot exert complete control without an inevitable uprising.

The tension between the two cultures represented in the story are clear, but reading the story in translation loses an additional example of the significant tension between the Puerto Rican and United States cultures. Eva Santos-Phillips highlights the additional way in which the text shows the tension in cultures by saying, “Ferré uses hybrid writing. In doing so, she shows Puerto Ricans’ hybrid culture resulting from United States intervention on the island” (117). This hybrid writing is a combination of Spanish and English words that shows the influence of the United States culture on the Puerto Rican population. For this reason, Santos -Phillips concludes that the story “is representative of postcolonial literature” (118). As a writer that deals with the tension between two cultures, Ferré is best able to convey the tension by subverting narrative expectations with the use of multilingual expression and the invocation of the magically real.

By drawing on the rich tradition of realism while subverting its primary characteristics, Ferré’s story capitalizes on the power of magical realism to challenge

and trouble the expectations of readers. As Faris explains, “Magical realism radically modifies and replenishes the dominant mode of realism in the West, challenging its basis of representation from within” (1). Just as Ferré has lived in a society with starkly different cultural influences, “Amalia” explores the tension. The cultural tension that magical realism enables Ferré to express is the tension between the influence of the United States and a Puerto Rican identity; as Franco points out, Puerto Rico “is a country of deep though often muted antagonisms over questions of Puerto Rican identity and language” (Franco ix). In “Amalia,” the tension ends in disaster because the dominant culture, represented by the uncle, is corrupted by power and a desire to maintain an isolated, incestuous paradigm.

Works Cited

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