

# The Emergence of Latin American Fiction: A Brief Study of the Background

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[Latin America is geographically a vague concept. However Latin American fiction has recently gained adequate popularity as a definable literary term. This article aims to show how this seemingly paradoxical event took place in the history of Latin American literature and how distinctively this term now designates a new literary concept.]

The boundary of Latin America has never been geographically demarcated. We cannot say from which points in the latitude and longitude Latin America starts and where ends as a geographical territory. We are not even sure on which basis the territory has been named *Latin America*. Generally it is said that the territory in which the linguistic branches of Latin e.g. Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian etc. are in common use is known as Latin America. This definition legitimates even the inclusion of Canada, Haiti and Martinique in Latin America. But Latin America practically does not include them.

To avoid this fallacy, scholars like John A. Crow holds the opinion that the Latin languages which unify South and North American states under the concept of Latin America do not include French or Italian. In line with this opinion, he mentions that every characteristic of Spanish and Portuguese society was transferred to Latin America (Prologue, xxviii). However, the exclusion of French is simply illogical. If we exclude French and Italian from the attributive term 'Latin' occurring in the phrase 'Latin America', the term 'Latin' then loses at least half of its base because French and Italian constitute not less than half of what is considered now as Latin languages (Baugh 30). Nevertheless, howsoever be the base- full or half, strong or weak- Latin America is undeniably a geographical name defying everything preposterous lying behind the naming.

This practically real but theoretically unreal name of Latin America bears an implication that the literary narrative of Latin America may also likewise stand between the real and the unreal. And interestingly, the fictional narrative of Latin America really does so. This

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stand of Latin American fiction is so clear and visible to all that an illusive reality in-between the real and the unreal is now considered an almost inseparable characteristic of Latin American fiction. It appears that the commonest characteristic which puts the fictional narratives of the territories from Guatemala to Paraguay together under the umbrella term 'Latin American fiction' is simply that all these narratives involve or deal with a reality which seems unreal but is perceived as real by the people of all these countries together.

In the 1930s Luis Alberto Sanchez could not discover this characteristic in Latin American fictional narratives and therefore could say polemically that the Latin American novel didn't exist (qtd. in Brotherston 1). Now this feature is manifest to any reader of Latin American fiction and based on this feature it can be said unhesitantly that in Latin America the modern writers have 'created a literary tradition which transcends the boundaries of their separate nations and regions' (Brotherston 1). Among those who discovered this salient feature of Latin American narrative, Arturo Uslar Pietri is one of the first and eminent ones. Later, critics like Gordon Brotherston, Walter M. Langford have followed Pietri's view and have tried theoretically to establish 'Latin American fiction' as a literary and critical concept.

Walter M. Langford, Professor of modern languages, University of Notre Dame, has first elaborately explained why Latin American fiction did not exist before almost the middle of nineteenth century. The prime reason was censorship. To the utter misery of the Latin Americans, censors qualified to grant licenses for fictional works were only in Spain. Had a censor been available in each of the larger colonial cities the hurdle might have been somehow overcome. It is simply unimaginable how difficult it was for a writer in the colony to procure a license of the censor from Spain, so distant a land. A writer, after laboriously fashioning the manuscript by hand, would have had to send his only copy off to Spain by ship. It would be no wonder if the ship was pirated on its way and it would never reach its destination. 'But suppose it did, and that the censors finally issued their approval for the work to be printed, and then suppose that the manuscript made its back across the seas intact. By this time, a year or two- or four or five- after it was dispatched, the author might not even be among the living, or if alive not affluent enough to afford the costs of underwriting the publication of his book' (Langford 2). These obstacles were enough to resist the emergence of novel in Latin America especially in the colonial period.

What Sanchez said refers to this miserable reality. But it is a tale of the time at least before 1930s. In the 1940s a number of good critics and literary historians observed a new phase of Latin American literature offering a new type of fiction in world literature,

soon labelled world-wide as Latin American fiction. The internationally acclaimed writers who worked for the birth of this fictional genre include writers of a vast area that spreads from Mexico of North America to Argentina of South America. Gordon Brotherston has mentioned some eminent names from them: Miguel Angel Asturias of Guatemala (1899-1974), Alejo Carpentier of Cuba (1904-1980), Garcia Marquez of Colombia (1927-), Julio Cortazar of Argentina (1914-1984), Juan Rulfo of Mexico (1917-1986), Juan Carlos Onetti (1909 - 1994) of Uruguay, Jose Donoso of Chile (1924-1996) Joao Guimaraes Rosa of Brazil (1908-1967) and Jose Maria Arguedas of Peru (1911-1969).

These are the people who discovered the network of veins and arteries through which the blood circulates in the body of Latin America. Their stories showed the blood of Latin American story which is identical everywhere from Mexico to Argentina. They brought out the so-far untold stories lying inside the bosom of Latin America. These stories share the same reality all over Latin America and it is a reality which seems unreal in the eyes of the Europeans but, is very much real in the day-to-day life of the Latin Americans. The reality portrayed in these stories deceived the eyes of the Europeans and they could not understand what was what..

The European scholars were trying to find out the man whose life and reality these stories portrayed. But they were failing to identify the man. However, even an uneducated shepherd in the valleys of Chile could identify the man and could instantly say this or that was a story of the old woman living in their village. At the same time, an Jaliscan farmer in Mexico could identify the same woman with an old woman living nextdoor in their barren miserable land. This identity was based on a reality which involved the same misery of life, the same hopes rising from the same root of myths, the same despairs rising from the same root of events, and the same history of oppressions and exploitations in the name of the 'white god' and the 'white king'. The reality drawn from and supported by the symbiosis of all these seemingly heterogeneous elements grew hazy enough to deceive the European eyes and therefore it appeared quite unreal to them. But the people who regularly underwent these experiences could easily discern through this haziness the clear-cut figures of the Latin American world.

This reality which has served as the bed for stories of the Latin American writers since 1930s also serves as the common mark of identity for the fictional narrative that spreads all over Latin America, from Mexico to Argentina, from Guatemala to Paraguay. The novelists and the story writers have presented the reality, and the critics have come forward to theorise it so that the other world can understand and perceive this reality without error. 'Vargas Llosa's commentaries on Arguedas and Garcia Marquez,

Edmundo Desnoes's pungent essay on Carpentier, Fuentes's survey *The New Latin American Novel* and Donoso's personal history of the 'boom' of the novel in the 1960s' (Brotherston 2)- all critically exposed the nature of this reality, which, as a chord of coherence, binds together the Latin American narratives developing across countries. Their analysis of this new reality strengthened the theoretical base in which is embedded the term or concept 'Latin American Novel'. The theoretical base had been provided by the great writer and art critic Alejo Carpentier.

It was Alejo Carpentier who gave this reality a new name, 'marvelous real' (*realismo maravilloso*). In his famous essay "Baroque and the Marvellous Real", he has said unequivocally that Latin America is a world where European realism does not work. The Literature of Latin America could not develop till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century because till that time the writers had been trying to produce their tales in the plane of European realism. So, all their struggle was duly doomed. As soon as the Latin American writers could identify the difference between theirs and the European reality, they could get on the right track to build their own literature. Now, they could fashion their language and their mode of narrative suited to their own reality. In Carpentier's word: 'we have forged our language appropriately to the expression of our realities, and the events that await us will find that we, the novelists of Latin America, are the witnesses, historians, and interpreters of our great Latin American reality' (108). With the expression of this reality, Carpentier writes in his essay 'Magical Realism in Spanish America', during the ten fruitful years from 1941 to 1950 Latin America produced prose fiction comparable to the best in contemporary Italy, France or England (113).

To describe and explain this reality Carpentier cites many objects and experiences from a number of sources. He refers to Bernal Diaz del Casatillo's great chronicle where the Latin Americans find their world in which unknown animals are real, dragons are seen in rivers and strange mountains in snow and smoke. According to Carpentier, through this strangeness the present Latin American writer traces the unique trajectories of Latin American events. To exemplify how those trajectories help the present Latin American writer mould his narrative, Carpentier says:

The marvelous real is found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates in the history of the continent and who left the names that we still carry: from those who searched for the fountain of eternal youth and the golden city of Manoa to certain early rebels or modern heroes of mythological fame from our wars of independence, such as Colonel Juana de Azurduy. It has always seemed significant to me that even in 1780, sane Spaniards from Angostura would throw themselves into the search for El Dorado and that, in the days of the French revolution - - - the Compostellan Francisco Menendez would walk through the

land of Patagonia searching for the enchanted city of the Caesars. Focusing on another aspect of this theme we can see that whereas in western Europe folk dancing, for example, has lost all of its magical evocative power, it is hard to find a collective dance in America that does not embody a deep ritual sense and thus create around it a whole process of initiation: such are the dances of Cuban *santeria* or the prodigious version of the corpus festival, which can still be seen in a town called San Francisco de Yare in Venezuela. (Marvelous Real in America 87)

This quite long citation shows how the land of Latin America drew even the foreigners into the marvelous reality and moulded their sensing and thinking faculty to perceive the different reality of this land. Though late, the writers of Latin America have also sensed this marvelous reality and its unmatched power to give a full expression to the tale of their lives. Rulfo sensed it and his portrayal of life-and-death reality of Jalisco horribly expressed the post-revolution frustrations of Mexican life. Marquez sensed this marvelous reality and portrayed it. The result is the magical tale of massacre embodying the history of cruelties by the banana plantation company in Colombia and many other awe-inspiring tales like this. Carpentier himself sensed this marvelous reality and presented it in *The Kingdom of This World* and people all over the world were amazed to find the history of Haiti in the light of Latin American reality-sense.

This is how magic reality or the marvelous real, as Carpentier called it, provided the common base for all Latin American narratives. Now, the question 'what is Latin America' may not have an answer, but 'what is Latin American fiction' has an answer. The background of Latin American fiction as discussed above says that Latin American fiction designates the narrative of a vast community spreading over two Americas (North and South) where people experience the marvelous real in their day-to-day life.

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