LIBERATION THROUGH DESTRUCTION

FROM FANTASTIC CREATURES TO MARGINALIZED SOCIAL GROUPS

LIBERACIÓN A TRAVÉS DE LA DESTRUCCIÓN

DE CRIATURAS FANTÁSTICAS A GRUPOS SOCIALES MARGINADOS

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Keywords: fantastic creatures, supernatural, magical realism, female voices, discrimination, chaos, identities, destruction

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There are as many literatures as there are countries. Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain are each a product of diverse cultures, histories, and experiences. The regions differ in their unique literary traditions, shaped by the specific historical context and social landscape. Arturo Arias, John Beverley, Stephen Henighan, and others have been well-known for their research related to Central American literature, especially in countries such as Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. This literature often reflects the region's turbulent history of political instability, discrimination, and social upheaval.

Many scholars, such as David W. Foster, Silvia Molloy, Tulio H. Donghi, and others, are known for their extended studies of the literature and intellectual history of the Southern Cone: primarily in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. They observe that this section of the continent would have literature marked by its European influences, traditions and political histories. In the case of Argentina, there is Silvina Ocampo, known for her surrealist and fantastic short stories. Ocampo elaborates on questions of identity and reality. The world-known Isabel Allende is one of the most famous Chilean authors to widely use historic events in her works combined with a magic-realistic style.

Caribbean literature is marked by its dynamic influences, where African and indigenous cultures blend with European influences, in themes of colonialism, diaspora, and cultural hybridity. Scholars Roberto G. Echevarría, Mary L. Pratt

and others add to this view, analyzing Spanish literature, which often intersects more directly with Latin American and Caribbean narratives because of the shared language and historical connections. The diversity within Latin American, Caribbean, and Spanish literatures is immense, with each region contributing distinct voices and perspectives. In the literature of all these Spanish-speaking regions, we find recurring themes of redefinition, destruction, and survival.

This redefinition is achieved through an act of destruction carried out behind the mask of power that falls when these marginalized, discriminated, and excluded groups manage to free themselves from oppressive forces and embrace their independence. In analyzing the narratives covered in the compendium, the characters undergo a process that seeks to redefine them and allows them to assert themselves and advocate for their own rights, generating a sense of empowerment when they find a way to escape the oppressive margin that seeks to render them invisible. This transformation is not limited to human beings but extends to fantastic creatures, highlighting their potential to achieve the goal of changing their destiny and redefining their identity.

The fantastic creature serves as a vehicle that materializes or personifies fear, terror, and hatred toward certain individuals and the need to be represented in order to become part of the societies they inhabit, but which strive to exclude the "others" who, with their counter-narrative, seek to rise up and show the "other truth" that, dissenting, confronts the official one and reveals the side it has abandoned, thus recreating the "other part of the story." By using fantastic creatures from folklore, the analyzed narratives feature typical characters from horror, as defined by the American philosopher Noell Carroll in his book *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, first published in April 2006, where the author explains that: "Natural horror is that which brings natural fear due to something like Nazis, ecological disasters, etc. Horror as a category of ordinary language is a concept through which we communicate and receive information" (Carroll 40).

Fantastic creatures experience both stages of horror. The natural cause of environments that, threatening, controlling, and scrutinizing, surround and pursue them along with their agents to prevent them from developing freely. However, horror as a language category allows the use of these creatures to understand the message that threatens these individuals to intimidate them when they try to expose themselves. When horror appears and brings with it fantastic creatures or dissenting individuals, the environment becomes a space that, far from generating terror in its inhabitants, also generates abjection and rejection linked to the horror produced by the idea of "contamination" caused by these dissenting creatures. This rejection stems from what Carroll posits when he states in the same study that "horrific beings are often associated with contamination, discomfort, disease, and plague" (73). This plague can be

ideological, moral, social, political, sexual, religious, etc., generating rejection and a need to exclude the individual who possesses or professes it.

It is at that point of disgust, repulsion, fear, and contempt where the terror that appears through the "other" generates horror among those who share and accept the official narratives and seek to eliminate it. This horror pursues, abuses, punishes, and condemns those involved, creating scapegoats, following René Girard's term in his book *The Scapegoat*, where he explains the need to find a culprit and an object or victim responsible for social misfortunes (112). When individuals fall into these categories, dissenters are established, and horror surrounds societies, distancing, killing, nullifying, invalidating, and rejecting those who "do not belong" and need to be purged. Under these statutes, characters such as zombies and witches, as well as ghosts and vampires, are inserted into novels, revealing hidden meanings, other realities, and other discourses. They invite the reader to embark on a journey through time where dialogue with history, the present, the past, and the "unofficial" versions interact, providing a panorama of different visions that attempt to encompass all individuals.

The exploration of monstrosity and the feminine presents itself as a rich and multifaceted field that offers profound insights into cultural anxieties, gender dynamics, and social norms. Scholars like Natalia Méndez Álvarez and David Roas have made significant contributions to this area, providing critical frameworks for understanding how these themes are employed in literature. Méndez Álvarez's work on monstrosity and the unusual delves into how female authors use these motifs to challenge traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Her analysis of texts reveals how monstrosity can symbolize the transgression of boundaries and the subversion of patriarchal norms, offering a space for marginalized voices to articulate their experiences and resist normative constraints.

On the other hand, David Roas has extensively explored the role of the fantastic in contemporary literature, including how elements of the unsettling and the monstrous are used to interrogate reality and identity. Roas's work often intersects with feminist theory, examining how female authors employ the fantastic to question and destabilize dominant narratives about femininity and the body. "There is no doubt that an increasing number of women creators employ the fantastic as a form of expression in literature, theater, film, TV, and comics. This is opening new paths, including the development of themes and narrative forms that are absent or little explored in the works by male authors" (Roas and García 2). His studies highlight the ways in which the fantastic serves as a tool for critiquing cultural constructs and exposing underlying fears and prejudices.

Fabricating the abject or re-creating social dissidents

The literature and cinema of Latin America and Spain have been explored by many scholars who focused on the representation of the supernatural and marginalized groups, the interaction between myth and reality, as well as the use of fantastic elements, offering rich narratives that blend cultural mythology with socio-political commentary. Fantastic creatures such as ghosts, spirits, or mythical beings often serve as metaphors for historical traumas, societal injustices, or cultural identities. "Sabrina Vourvoulias, for example, has spent a lifetime working with oral recountings of Guatemalan nahualism (indigenous shape-shifting). She also evinces another tendency in Latino dark fantasy and horror: to sound the depths of our pre-Colombian past. In the case of Silvia Moreno-García, all her work arguably derives from folklore" (Bowles 2). This blending of the supernatural with social issues allows creators to delve into complex themes such as colonialism, postcolonial struggles, indigenous rights, and gender inequality.

The rejection by those in charge of safeguarding the established social order and ensuring its compliance towards all those who transgressed it can be linked to the concept of the abject, which remains latent to this day. For the Bulgarian theorist Julia Kristeva, in her book titled *Powers of Horror* (1980), the abject is defined as everything that expels, repels, and rejects the human being. Kristeva states that the abject is:

> "That has the quality of opposing the self. But if the object, by opposing it, balances me in the fragile fabric of an experienced desire that, in fact, homologated me indefinitely, infinitely to it, on the contrary, the abject, a fallen object, is radically excluded, and it attracts me. Towards where meaning collapses. A certain 'I' (moi) that has merged with its master. A super-ego has resolutely evicted it. It is outside, outside the set whose rules of the game it seems not to recognize. However, the abject does not cease, from exile, to challenge the master" (7).

Whom did the abject challenge in the past, and whom does it challenge in the present? It could be assumed that in the past, it challenged the presence and institutions of social power. The construction of the "other" dissident as abject for the members of these institutions of power generates official procedures such as repression, exile, torture, and death at the stake. However, these subjects, considered abject, generate their own agencies that are identified as heresy, magical rituals, demonic pacts, quackery, and idolatry. These agencies that respond against the established heterodoxies allow not only the permanence of beliefs, religions, and traditions that escape the Catholic Christian religious framework of the time but are also a means of survival for those individuals who needed a trade to survive, such as poor women, widows, or spinsters who,

not having male guardianship, resorted to the sale of love potions, love spells, quackery, and other practices, as stated by María Mannarelli in her book *Inquisition and Women: Sorceresses in Peru during the 17th Century* (1987), Marta Ortiz Canseco in her article "Witches and Beatas in the Viceroyalty of Peru" (2019), and Hélène Tropé in her article "The Inquisition against Madness in Spain in the 16th and 17th Centuries: The Elimination of Heretics" (2010).

The concept of abjection serves as a tool that allows us to study and understand the mechanics through which these characters move in a certain fictional environment, but also in a real one. Literature, together with other narrative media such as legends, stories and folklore, reveals these beings in different historical periods. The concept of the abject, as that which rejects and is rejected, can work both in the colonial, republican and modern periods, responding to each in a different way and through different agencies of both repression and power, as well as ingenuity and defiance of those who, as Kristeva explains: "defy the master" (7). In the colonial period, the abject can be considered in the category of moral-religious abject, combined with the ideological-political abject. The moral-religious aspect was linked to the challenge to the power of the state, at the moment of transgressing the norms and breaking with the social order and its behavior patterns.

The clinical-pathological abject: A construct of the ideological, moral, and social dissident

Under concepts of medicine and psychiatry, which were not endorsed until the twentieth century, state institutions generate a clinical pathological abject in terrifying supernatural characters (health problem) and separate it from the sociopolitical abject, linking it with a pathological-ideological abject (public order and state security problem). This results in the political pathological abject that challenges established laws and transgresses the "normal." This construct is exemplified in the novel *98 Seconds Without Shadow* (2014) by Bolivian writer Giovanna Rivero and the film *Man Facing Southeast* by Argentine filmmaker Eliseo Subiela, among others, where religious and health institutions are responsible for repressing and confining the "dissenters," claiming the danger of their coexistence with the outside world.

These horror characters, who are monitored, excluded from society, and even killed, are classified under categories such as madmen, terrorists, and disturbed individuals. The purpose is the same as during the colonial era: to nullify their discourse and justify their confinement and social isolation. The establishment of madness and categories of mental illnesses allows this type of pathology to justify the control of counter-discourse to invalidate it, along with sexual and political dissent. It is worth noting that it was not until after 1973, that psychiatrist Robert Spitzer removed homosexuality from *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*

of Mental Disorders, disqualifying it from the classification of mental pathology (Spitzer). I use this example to highlight that, until then, dissenting sexual practices were assumed to be behaviors deserving confinement and isolation in mental health centers, medically and legally excluding those who did not share the heteronormative discourse on sexuality and, therefore, challenged public order and established norms regarding sexual conduct. This is exemplified in the novel *Beauty Salon* (1994) by Mexican writer Mario Bellatín, where dissent, non-acceptance, ingenuity, and resistance of individuals are depicted. Men, women, children, adolescents, the elderly—there is no discrimination for these characters. What exists is exile, from which they must raise their voices to strengthen their identity and break free from the oppressive past that leads them to an apparent dead-end where loneliness and rejection appear as their only options to continue their lives.

Colonial narratives have been the foundation for modern "fictional" literary stories, both historical and fantastic in nature. They have allowed the horror experienced by Latin American, Caribbean, and Spanish societies to define stories that do not marginalize the "other truth" but instead integrate it into a network of knowledge where the non-existent is necessary to understand the dynamics of the interplay between the material and the immaterial, thought and its repercussions through different actions. The finalist story for the 1998 Copé Prize by anthropologist Luis Enrique Tord, titled *The Admiral's House*, exemplifies the construction of moral and religious abjection during the Viceroyalty of Peru, narrating the "dissident" practices of alchemy and astrology of the then Spanish admiral Francisco Alderete Maldonado (Tord). This story helps to understand the continuity of the construct of abjection and the various foundations on which it has built its roots up to our times.

Contemporary narratives of the abject: Can the dissenter be feminine

In the literary works analyzed in this volume, a rich tapestry unfolds where witches, demons, sorcerers, and fantastic creatures coexist within contemporary, modern, and even colonial settings. Their inclusion brings the stories to life, giving voice and space to those who have been marginalized, alienated, or rejected by society. However, the presence of these diverse and extraordinary characters challenges various hierarchies. The importance of the setting in which they evolve and their daily coexistence with their peers and those around them provide a clear understanding of the concept of exclusion, but also of the formation of society, homeland, and nation, where the need for religious, political, sexual, and gender hygiene seeks to prevail by obstructing the lives of individuals with rules, institutions, hospitals, laws, and social codes. The problem arises when those who are not wanted nearby rise from their place and show the oppressor that they do not need them because they are self-sufficient

despite what has been taken, torn, mutilated, and buried. The forged identities do not disappear; rather, they are reaffirmed in the contempt with which they are treated and in the rejection and ignorance of the other, whom they attempt to erase with silence, indifference, and exclusion.

The fantastic creatures move in putrid, elegant, antagonistic, war, peace or scary scenarios depending on the need that arises to tell what cannot, should not and must not remain in the air. Without the setting, the narrative does not work, just as without the presence of these beings, novels, stories, tales, or myths do not work in the same way. As an example, it is important to mention the novel by the Colombian journalist Germán Castro Caycedo, titled *La bruja, coca, política y demonio,* published for the first time in the year 1994, and with a second edition in 2012 with Planeta Editores, where the main character is a poor woman who knows prayers, witchcraft and reading letters, tools that allow her to climb into the shadows of Colombian high society helping politicians with dirty businesses, favoring candidates for governor with spells and learning about the horrors that made up both the country and the people where she lived. This woman becomes a respected and feared witch, who was called a "seasoned witch" (99) because she had no regard for bewitching priests or members of the church. Accused in public, Amanda Londoño is forced to leave a Sunday sermon and admit that she is a "witch" for whom witchcraft works well.

Isn't the same mold of her colonial predecessor followed by this "modern witch" who, alone, childless, poor, without husband or guardianship, needs to manage and learn occult knowledge to survive? A novel set in the twenty-first century, based on a real testimony, allows us to understand how that other (a) is still marginalized who, far from harming for taste or pleasure, serves as a link with darkness and the hidden arts to satisfy the pleasures of your clients. The curiosity of the human being, whether male or female, young or old, does not miss the opportunity to spy on the side of the invisible to see if "magic" exists, finding through these "witches" an alternative possibility of satisfaction and calm for their lives.

These creatures mingle in modern, contemporary and even colonial literary scenarios to give life and give space to the marginalized, separated and rejected who, under clinical, social or derogatory labels and nicknames, try to position them in a lower step than the others, the so-called "normal." When women are seen as witches or as autonomous people, fear appears in others. The dissident woman is singled out, imprisoned, confined, and interrogated because she is not welcome. The subjugation of the masculine, as opposed to feminine liberation and economic autonomy, positions women in a liminal space between what is accepted and what is repudiated, what is normal and what is "terrifying," and, therefore, all those who have left an inheritance for others. It is the "woman"

who does not follow the regulations, who transgresses the laws, who evokes the heroines who took action such as Antígona or La Llorona, who take revenge to find an equitable point between what is "fair" and what is "unfair," "the "right" and the "wrong" and then they position themselves in a limbo that builds them as feared beings.

From the literary to the supernatural: The role of the fantastic in contemporary narratives

The inclusion of supernatural elements in Latin American literature plays a significant role in describing historical and social issues. These elements provide authors with a powerful tool to explore and criticize colonialism, dictatorship, and other forms of political repression that have marked the region's history. They show the link between individual characters and their heritage, as well as the transformative power of resilience in the face of life's adversities. These elements help create a unique literary style that blurs the boundaries between the real and the unreal. As Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa states, "I was born into a world of stories full of color and warmth, tragedy and magic, and humor. I was born into a world of music and intuitive knowledge, and overwhelming aromas" (2).

As it has been mentioned, Latin American and Caribbean literature, just like Spanish literature, is a strongly committed literature in remembering and praising its culture. It amazes readers by plunging them into the typical spirit of these territories, which knows how to combine folklore and magical elements with something new in the tales. Works like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez and *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende use magical realism smoothly to introduce into their stories the spiritual angle associated with Latin American cultures, therefore shedding light on the rich heritage of the region. For example, *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya gives evidence of how this magic represents power and should be treated with respect regarding the preservation of ancestors' traditions. He extends this assertion in the book's introduction; "For me, Ultima, la curandera, is a healer in the traditions of our native New Mexican healers. Her role is to open Antonio's eyes to see the beauty of the landscape and understand the spiritual roots of his culture" (xviii).

Many writers and filmmakers use magical realism as a technique of narration in portraying the daily life of Latin America's marginalized communities, both in literature and cinema. As an example, Gabriel García Márquez, in his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, makes use of magical realism to comment on the structures of power in Latin America. Lindsey Moore writes that magical realism is characterized by two different perspectives that always conflict with each other: one from a supposed rational view of reality and another from the acceptance of the supernatural as mundane reality. She terms it a mode of

literature rather than a definable genre. Since it is a combination of reality and magic, the writer can state the relevant information and features of Latin American experience. This factor makes magical realism an alternative view on the events described in novels, as well as evokes emotions in readers (Jenkins 61). It would be misleading to generalize magical realism as the phenomenon of Latin American writing, and many critics consider this issue to be controversial. While magical realism is undoubtedly significant, it represents just one part of the region's diverse literature. The reductive tendency in using magical realism as the synonym for Latin American literature was seriously criticized by scholars such as Wendy B. Faris and Lois P. Zamora on the grounds that this reduces the rich variety of genres and themes pursued by Latin American writers. Women writers such as Claribel Alegría of Nicaragua and Rosario Ferré of Puerto Rico write works that are appealing in allowing a movement beyond magical realism into a more contemporary concern with gender, politics, and social justice in forms and style.

Within Latin American literature, the infusion of magic and folkloric elements serves as a captivating vehicle to portray the distinctiveness of women and their transformative journeys. Ruth Jenkins discusses that from magical realism to feminist perspectives, female characters are characterized by their depth, complexity, and unwavering resilience. The incorporation of supernatural elements further illuminates their distinct and exceptional experiences. It is imperative to underscore that the role of women in Latin American literature has been a significant and evolving theme, reflecting the political and cultural changes experienced by women in the region. Latin American authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Cristina Peri Rossi, and Elena Poniatowska make meaning of their worlds and the complexities, contradictions, and varied experiences that characterize their existences (Dabrowski 2-3). Their literary creations also illuminate the domestic violence experienced by women, bringing attention to this pressing issue and emphasizing the need for society as a whole to address it. Female characters confront profound queries about their identity, authority, and freedom while navigating through the complexities of societal expectations and cultural norms.

This volume compiles six chapters featuring as main characters fantastic creatures or figures that belong to the periphery, the margins, the other side that contemporary societies seek to avoid, evade, and keep at bay. La Llorona and witches are women who create their own space of recognition for their work and existence. They do not need to survive but live according to their own rules, confront their societies, accept their labels, and find ways of liberation that allow them to continue their practices or censor them, depending solely on their will or destiny. The fatality surrounding these characters is intrinsically

linked to their decisions and past, creating a line that, although blurry, marks a present and past that need to be redefined.

On the other hand, Rudolfo Anaya with *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) and Cristina García with the novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) create their fictional worlds through the lens of magical realism, where marginalized women find strength and identity by using their magical powers. However, mythical time blends with fantastic creatures and is set in Mexico City, where zombies are depicted in Javier González Cárdenas's novel *Muerto Después de Muerto* (2013). Here, drug traffickers lose their humanity and become entities, creatures whose monstrous bodies reflect the decomposition of the society in which they operate, as well as the fierce environment surrounding them, creating an allegory of drug trafficking in Mexico. Violence, fate, fear, and strength are the central themes connecting and illustrating the connections these characters make to survive.

Finally, Manuel Scorza in *Garabombo, el Invisible* (1972) establishes a dialogue linking the human and the animal, life and death, mythical time and real time, as well as peace and violence, creating a scenario of antagonisms and struggles where peasant communities are forced to confront the Peruvian state, transnational companies, and landowners who continuously seek to take control and centralize power. With elements of the Andean Peru, the characters, although human, inhabit intertwined spaces that generate parallel realities and place them in the realm of the marginalized with a voice—those who exist, the excluded, the others who belong even as the "officials" strive to annihilate them.

In summary, the literature of Latin America and the Caribbean encapsulates a multitude of acts of redefinition, often facilitated through destruction. These acts symbolize the new power gained through independence and the liberation from oppressive forces.

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Introducción: Criaturas fantásticas, mujeres y marginales: Radiografías sociales en la literatura contemporánea de América Latina y el Caribe

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Palabras clave: criaturas fantásticas, sobrenatural, realismo mágico, voces femeninas, discriminación, caos, identidades, destrucción

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Hay tantas literaturas como países. América Latina, el Caribe y España son cada uno producto de diversas culturas, historias y experiencias. Estas regiones difieren en sus tradiciones literarias únicas, moldeadas por el contexto histórico específico y el paisaje social. Arturo Arias, John Beverley, Stephen Henighan y otros, son conocidos por sus investigaciones relacionadas con la literatura centroamericana, especialmente en países como Guatemala, Honduras y Nicaragua. Esta literatura refleja a menudo la turbulenta historia de la región, caracterizada por la inestabilidad política, la discriminación y la agitación social.

Muchos académicos, como David W. Foster, Silvia Molloy, Tulio H. Donghi y otros, son reconocidos por sus amplios estudios de la literatura e historia intelectual del Cono Sur: principalmente en Argentina, Chile y Uruguay. Ellos observan que esta parte del continente tendría una literatura marcada por sus influencias europeas, tradiciones e historias políticas. En el caso de Argentina, destaca Silvina Ocampo, conocida por sus cuentos surrealistas y fantásticos, en los cuales explora cuestiones de identidad y realidad. La mundialmente famosa Isabel Allende es una de las autoras chilenas más reconocidas, conocida por utilizar ampliamente eventos históricos en sus obras combinados con un estilo de realismo mágico.

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