

Of Coevalness, Homochronism, Imperialism, and Segregationism: Re-reading Allende's *City of Beasts*

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Abstract

Chilean-American writer Isabel Allende—of the Salvador Allende fame—shot to literary prominence with her mesmerizing magical realist fictioneering in *City of Beasts* in 2002. The book ostensibly comes forth with a tale of a very adventurous expedition to the Amazonian Rainforest to visit the tribes there and inoculate them against smallpox. But many layers of liminal plurisignification begin to surface in the matrix of the fiction once the readers get over the euphoria of an adventure tale and probe deeper for figurative dimensions. The novel can very well be read as an exemplum of colonial discourse. The rubric of the novel explores the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' attitude underneath the garb of philanthropic missioneering, thereby positing the White dos-a-dos the indigenous, thus making room for debate about Coevalness and Homochronism and the alterity that it necessarily entails.

This paper proposes to evaluate the text of Allende's *City of Beasts* from a post-colonial perspective to unearth socio-psychological issues that tend to evade the eye, prima-facie, but disturb with the lingering uneasiness of colonial marginalization, once it is figured out from between the lines of what at first glance shows up as an innocuous 'young-adult' novel.

Keywords— Alterity, Homochronism, Magical realist, 'monarch-of-all-I-survey', plurisignification.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

When Isabel Allende, famous as much for her bold invasive style of writing as for being related to Salvador Allende, first came out with her *La Ciudad de las Bestias* translated as *City of the Beasts*[1] by Margaret Sayers Peden from Spanish to English in 2002, the book became an instant best seller. Yet the tag of children's literature has often threatened to subvert the umpteen other serious issues that nestle so very inostensibly in the multilayered dialogism that the book holds out.

The book uses magical realism as an unpretentious veneer to couch more significant issues that often plague the dialogue between one ethnic group with the other, especially if one is supposed to be racially, politically or socially superior than the other. Allende's novel never ever expresses any overt intention to uphold any such relational redescription of the equations of the world, but, covertly it endorses certain despotic factors that whet the fracas between two human categories or civilisations or countries, when they come into contact with one another

2. MAGICAL REALISM

Professor Matthew Strecher defines magic realism as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe." (36) Again, art critic Franz Roh in 1925, opines that Magic realism 'employs various techniques that endow all things with a deeper meaning and reveal mysteries that always threaten the secure tranquility of simple and ingenuous things.... it is a question of representing before our eyes, in an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world.'(51)

Allende in *City of Beasts*, combines magic with reality in the Strecherian way as a group of archaeologists launch into an adventurous expedition that takes them deep into the heart of the Amazon, where they, cut off from the real world outside, are transported into a magical one where they encounter fantastical 'Beasts' and 'people of the Mist' with their repertoire of singular ways and rituals. The book brings forth the story of young 15-year-old Alexander in a moment of a grave family crisis. His parents have to leave for Texas to get his mother's cancer treated. Alex is sent off to New York City to stay with his kind of eccentric grandmother Kate Cold, a reporter for International Geographic Magazine. In fast-paced succession, Kate decides to take Alex with her to the Amazon rainforest. They reach the jungle and join the rest of the expedition group— Timothy Bruce the photographer and his assistant Joel Gonzalez. With them is the famous anthropologist, Ludovic Leblanc, the beautiful Venezuelan physician Dr. Omayra Torres, who is coming along to vaccinate natives, and Cesar Santos, their Brazilian guide. Alex becomes great friends Nadia, a girl several years younger than him, who is the daughter of Cesar Santos the guide. The group, as they push deeper into the jungle, get more and more sequestered from the European world they know and belong to. The term 'other' plays games as the readers wonder who suits it best –the tribes that these Whites are going to look for or the handful of Europeans themselves who have overstepped known boundaries to invade land that belongs to the Amazonians.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The book has a multi-layered construct of signification. On the surface level, it presents the exciting adventure of Alex as he makes the daring foray into the Amazon with the team of archaeologists. But as the story unfolds and the two parties get to confront each other, a number of other issues start cropping up that open out a panoply of analysis. The story line underneath the inostensible façade of an innocuous expedition story, probes subcutaneously into more aspects that are not so facile and do put one into thought that is laced with colonial overtones, reminiscent of the long tradition of the Wild West of making tentative inroad into the more indigenous parts of the world as explorers, and then slowly putting out acquisitionist tentacles into the socio-economic-political existence of the same land.

Allende's *City of Beasts*, thus introduces the concept of Magic Realism in the way Franz Roh meant, too, as she infuses the simplificatory text with clous that are more esoteric. Thus the novel brings in strains of the Explorer motif, Coevalness, Homochronism, Imperialism, Stadial segregationism and Primitivism in its purview.

4. EXPLORER MOTIF

Right from the outset then, the storyline harps on the European Explorer motif as the party winds its way into the deep of the rainforests on their mission. Along with that, one finds the Philanthropic Motif too, as the expedition ostensibly undertakes to vaccinate the natives to save them from epidemic and death by reaching out the modern marvels of science from the progressive part of the world to the retrogressive one. The Superior Enlightened reaches out to the Inferior benighted part of humanity in benign benevolence.

The boat travels upriver with the expeditionists towards the destination—World's Eye. The name itself is significantly reminiscent of the numerous expeditions that the Western part of the world has seen and sent into the bowels of the East, the heart of Africa and the virgin lands of the Amazon. An uneasy premonition sets in into the minds of the readers who recall how most of the European ‘expeditions’—like the ones led by Cecil Rhodes or John Ross—into the lesser known parts of the world had ended up in histories of acquisition and imperial despotism that had often taken an ugly turn.

The storyline deepens and so does its symbolic plurisignification. The prima facie façade of a simplistic young adult story begins to take on a more serious note as one realizes that the name ‘World’s Eye’ could not have been a coincidental brainwave intended just to hone suspense. The ‘World’s Eye’ was pointing to something that had significantly and homochronically taken up the global attention, too.

5. DENIAL OF COEVALNESS

Allende seems to deny coevalness—to use the anthropological term brought into circulation by Johannes Fabian—to the inhabitants of the *City of the Beasts*—positing them in a stasis that threatens stagnation in some long-forgotten age of evolution. On top of that, the closeness to the Anacondas and the unknown killer beasts subverts the progressiveness of civilization in this particular spatial juncture, endowing it with a retrogression that forecloses possibilities of civilization somehow.

As the story progresses, the music from Alex’s flute attracts the mysterious People of the Mist. Just as the readers begin to expect serendipitous positivity from the mysterious creatures, they kidnap the two children. The expedition follows the savages farther into the forest towards the home of the People of the Mist, where, on reaching the village, they meet the Indians. Things warm up as the old chief Mokarita eventually dies and during the funeral, everyone is given a drug which reveals totems. Nadia’s totem turns out to be an eagle while Alex’s totem is a Jaguar. One realizes that Allende in absolute subtlety, edges in the discourse of the imperial enterprise that the European part of the world basked in with smug omnipotence for long until decolonization started to set in after the second World War. The Jaguar and the eagle both stand as apt signifiers of the predatory acquisitionist powers that the West endorsed. This coming after the mention of the World’s Eye, followed by the reference to the exploratory inroad into the unravaged Wild, just in the mode of the Empirical European explorer who reaches out to the uncivilized to spread the light of enlightenment among the benighted souls there. To take the epitomisation even farther, Allende relates how Alex, being fifteen, is put through a rite of

passage into manhood, during the ceremony of which he turns into a jaguar, his totem, thus consolidating the duality of coming into his true colours as one in the imperialist European group along with the tactical ploy of gaining inclusiveness into the indigenous through becoming a part of their rites and rituals. The naïve, though suspicious amity extended to the White party by the old Chief Mocarita does ring a bell though as one remembers how the History of Imperialism had seen a juncture when the Matabele leader Lobenguela had eventually granted all the rights to mining in his territory to the famous White acquisitioner Cecil Rhodes in the mistaken belief that all he wanted was gold, only to find how he slowly phagocytosises up as much of his empire as possible.

6. SOFT PRIMITIVISM VIS A VIS IMPERIALIST FORCES

The story celebrates what is known as Soft Primitivism as the plot probes deeper into the wooded hills and labyrinthine bowels of the mysterious rainforest. The primitivism deepens as the Shaman of the tribe takes them to visit the Beasts, who live in a city deep within the forest. These Beasts are considered to be their Gods by the People of the Mist. Jaguar correctly assumes their city to be the famous El Dorado which is really made from gold. As 'Jaguar' and 'Eagle' start their journey to visit El Dorado like the predatory acquisitionist marching into the city of gold to plunder their imperial mission through, the readers can sniff the sulphurous subfumes of explosion just like the inside of the dormant volcano that the city of El Dorado is located in. Conjecture warns that a counter-discourse is in the offing as the imperialist force seems to be going too far in for appropriateness. One remembers how during the 1880s, Europeans believed that there was gold in Matabeleland because of its location between rich mineral deposits already discovered in Katanga in Congo and the 'mineral scoop' in Witwatersrand in South Africa and also how after the unbelievably parochial conditions of *La Mission Civilisatrice* and the *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871), by Joseph-Ernest Renan the 'West' went forward with invincible steps into the 'Rest' with the smug conceit of spreading the vestiges of civilization into the dark corners of barbaric worlds.

However, Alex and Nadia do meet the 'Beasts', who resemble giant sloths and epitomize the living memory of the tribe by remembering long epic poems recited by Walimai and his predecessors. Apprehensive that these ancient creatures could be captured by western scientists, Eagle and Jaguar, though themselves part of the same expedition, warn them to be careful of foreigners. Yet close at the heels of their offer to protect the 'Beasts', the two children ask for gifts: Nadia the 'crystal eggs' and Alex 'the water of life' to save his mother.

This again, could symbolically be deconstructed as the European rush for diamonds and petroleum. The 'crystal eggs' could as well be read as the diamonds that had Europe scrambling for proprietary rights in the mid-nineteenth century onwards as the 'water of life' could imply petroleum. And sure enough, at the end of the novel, Nadia gives Alex the three 'crystal eggs', which actually turn out to be giant diamonds.

This reminds one of a little history again as one recalls how Cecil Rhodes, a dominant European figure in southern Africa in the late 19th century, spent most of his time looking for

diamonds at Kimberley, where he ultimately amassed a fortune in diamonds. He too, had begun his inroad into the Black nation as an explorer.

As the storyline draws towards the end, Nadia convinces the Indians to receive vaccinations. But as things turn out, the vaccines are actually deadly doses of the measles virus, injected into the bodies of the natives as part of Carias's plan to destroy the Amazonian Indians. Yet, ironically enough, one member of the expedition, Karakawe, is actually an officer of the Department for the Protection of Indigenous Peoples. This again, aims a tongue-in-cheek jibe at the double-faced stance of the European expeditions to the East—which under the inconspicuous facade of expedition for scientific reasons and philanthropic mission were actually insidious acquisitionist forays into maiden ground for wealth, gold, diamonds, petroleum and land that left the indigenous population bereft, othered and marginalised.

Recalling Cecil Rhodes and the European brood once again, history vouches for how Rhodes wanted to unite the world under one Anglo-Saxon empire. Rhodes wrote in 1877 about his vision of an empire that included Africa, South America, the East Asian Coast, most of the Holy Land, and South Pacific islands, too.

7. THE 'MONARCH-OF-ALL-I-SURVEY' MOTIF

Allende's *City of Beasts*, though it describes an European expedition into the Amazonian tribal regions, never really makes any sanction of the ostensible objective of sanctioning Imperial conquest acknowledged anywhere. Yet, it could be said to be one of the wandwagon that did help the process of Imperial Enterprise.

City of Beasts insinuates a lot by suggestion. The book talks of the rich natural resources of the Amazon and the 'Valuable-articles-of-commerce' like crystal eggs and water of life, thereby necessarily hinting at the lucrative opportunities for trade that can open up to European probing. And by etching out suggestive and tempting accounts of the profitability that the Amazon holds out, she whets the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' attitude of the Imperialist force. In fact, Allende's work reminds one how Henry Morton Stanley in *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) talked superciliously of the need of 'a band of philanthropic Capitalists' to 'rescue these beautiful lands.' (vol I, 38)

City of Beasts too, tacitly sanctions External Administration by Europeans.

8. HOMOCHRONISM

The novel waxes eloquent on the primitive ways of the indigenous people by detailing their rituals, totems etc, which are invariably a far cry from the rational empiricism of the Enlightened West. And by doing so, the novel imperatively emphasises a primitive, retrogressive picture about the indigenous people and underlines their barbarism and savagery. This also sanctions the necessity of an Imperial or Colonial force to manage them, man them and keep them in order as if they are not capable of doing so themselves—thereby intending to rationalise the necessity of the West to rescue these supposedly benighted masses into the light of civilization. *City of Beasts* thus, endorses the magnanimity of the White Man's Burden.

Again, the novel hints at racio-scientific inferiority in a classificatory attitude that is quite subtle but potentially pernicious. The tribes and their ancestral legacy is pooled as memory in the shelter of 'beasts'. This then could be read as a subversion of the human status of the indigenous tribes, thereby relegating them to an alterity that flatly denies coevalness though in reality both, the explorer and the explored share the same historical moment.

Homochromism, thus takes over as the 'other' suffers the brunt of the 'denial of coevalness' –as Johannes Favian termed it.

9. STADIAL THEORY

The book also validates the Stadial Theory which vouches for the theory that human communities evolve naturally through successive stages of social, economic and technological development. By describing the primitive ways of the Amazonians, the novel makes out as if these tribes are still stuck in the stage of the Hunters of the stone ages.

Over and above that when the expedition boat makes its way up the river, everyone has the indefinable *unheimlich* feeling of being constantly watched. Things begin to go wrong as one soldier dies being shot by a poisoned dart as poisoned darts begin to rain on all sides. Following this, Joel Gonzalez, the photographer's assistant, is almost killed by an anaconda while another soldier gets nearly killed by an unknown Beast. All this—the primitive poisoned darts, the proximity to wild beasts and anacondas—leaves one feeling transported to a temporal and spatial juncture that seems to have come to a standstill somewhere in the bowels of history. Historical Stasis takes over as Stadial Theory comes in to praxis, making it seem like whoever inhabits the deep of the forests hers have been left a lot behind in the stadial progress chart.

Often, in texts that relate the Western foray into the east—like Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent*[4]—the unenlightened tribes and tribal leaders, on coming face to face with the explorer, would be shown to be deeply suspicious of the motives of the enlightened 'Empirical Explorer' from the 'progressive' West. The readers here would be expected to smile in benevolent condescension at the naïve stupidity of the ignorant, backward communities that this kind of behaviour towards their potential 'saviour' was supposed to reveal. *City of Beasts* does it too, thereby consolidating the discourse of Inferiority again.

10. CONCLUSION

Allende's *City of Beasts*, thus, makes an ostensible show of the 'Anti-Conquest' motif—the oh-so-enlightened 'Empirical Explorer motif' which becomes a template of the epitomisation of European superiority per se. the whole process smacks of the smug condescension of the emissary of the advanced world deigning to probe into the dark, unenlightened continent to see if he could rescue them by dint of the 3 Cs of Imperialism and Colonialism: 1. Civilisation, 2. Christianity and 3. Commerce. The book on the surface shows up as a tale of adventure and excitement. But a close reading between lines turns out a plethora of themes and subthemes that open up a trope of colonial discourse.

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