PUZZLING TIME-FLUX AND MAGICAL REALISM IN PEDRO PARAMO

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Abstract - Mexican literary doyen Juan Rulfo has exercised several techniques in Pedro Páramo which the later critics have recognised and appreciated as important magic realistic traits or characteristics. An important one among them is the puzzling Time-flux of events. However, we have not so far noticed any detailed analysis of Rulfo's technique of puzzling Time-flux of events and its contribution to magical realism. This essay is an attempt to analyse the puzzle of the movement of time along the chronicles or events of the novel Pedro Paramo and an evaluation of the contribution of this puzzle to the narrative mode called magical realism.

Keywords - Magical Realism, Uncanny, Time-flux, Narrative Mode

It was the Latin American critics, not the European ones, who first hinted at the Time perspective as a magic realistic concern in fiction. Angel Flores first drew attention to this hitherto unnoticed criterion in several expressions. He said that in a magic realistic work of fiction 'from the very first line the reader is thrown into a timeless flux' (114). He again said that in a magic realistic text 'the narrative moves smoothly, translucently, bound for an infinite timeless perspective' (115). Flores also said that in a magic realistic text 'time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity' (115). Probably based on this emphasis laid by Flores on the 'timeless perspective', Wendy B. Faris also gave due importance to this as a criterion of magic realism, while assimilating the major criteria of magic realism in his famous essay Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction. Faris said that magic realistic works of fiction 'question received ideas about time, space and identity' (Faris 173).

The Time-perspective in Pedro Paramo is as slippery and fluid as it has ever been in any novel. Susan Sontag has described this slippery Time-perspective in a borrowed sentence: here 'everything occurs in a simultaneous time which is a no-time' (Sontag, "Foreword"). No doubt, the 'timeless perspective', the 'timeless flux' and the 'timeless fluidity', which are different expressions of the same criterion of magic realism, seem to be very abstract and amorphous as concepts. But, Pedro Páramo enables us to grasp them and realise them just within its first 14 pages.

Juan Preciado begins the story as its narrator, and his narration continues consecutively in the first five chapters. Naturally from the narrator's relationship with the story and from his point of view, the story receives a certain time-dimension. To cope with realism, this time-dimension set by the first episode of the novel must adjust itself to the time reference of the other episodes. This means that the other event or events following it, in terms of their time of occurrence, are bound to be within one of these three situations- (i) both the events are simultaneous, (ii) one precedes the other or (iii) follows it. But, if the following event or episode is narrated maintaining a thick haziness so that it does not at all become clear whether they are simultaneous or preceding each other, Time then seems to be fluid enough not to have any definite outline or demarcation. The event moving into the narrative of Pedro Páramo just after the fifth chapter is as hazy as this in terms of its time reference.

Juan Preciado has come to Comala to make his father, Pedro Paramo, pay for all those years he put Preciado and his mother away 'out of his mind'. So, the time associates with it these specifications that Pedro Paramo is now quite old as his son is going to meet him to claim his rights. Again, it seems to be specified as a time when Abundio, another son of Pedro Paramo, has not yet killed his father as he is guiding Preciado to Comala. The events following this arrival of Preciado at Comala then continue up to Chapter 5 in a smooth flow and in a realistic time-perspective. But, Chapter 6 suddenly appears as an interpolation into the story with everything exotic-time, place and character all. The chapter begins with the picture of a house, but it is never told where it is. Here, people are found speaking but who they are is not at all disclosed. And, last of all, there is no time-reference in its narration so that we can locate the time of the event in relation with the time of the earlier event of Preciado's arrival. Time seems to have lost its grasp over the event, and resultantly the event related in Chapter 6 appears to be taking place simply in timelessness. The timelessness or fluidity of time as described by Flores is thus concretised in our perception just within first fourteen pages of Pedro Páramo. We begin to perceive that Time has been conjured up to pass into nonentity and thereby to give a great magical effect to the whole story.

Then in Chapter 9 where the real time setting has again been established with its connection to the time and episode of Preciado's arrival at Comala, a silent blow to Time disrupts its realistic flow though we sense the stunning impact of that blow at the last but

one chapter of the novel. Eduviges Dyada contextually tells Preciado that Abundio brought the mail and 'he kept right on even after he went deaf' (Rulfo, Peden, Pedro Páramo 15). This little information gives a blow to the total time-frame of the novel. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, we come to know that the shrill cry of Damiana Cisneros at the sight of Pedro Paramo being killed by Abundio deafened Abundio for ever. But, Abundio was already deaf when he was guiding Preciado to Comala. Pedro Paramo was also dead, and the dead is receiving the blow of Abundio himself. There remains no logical answer to the question why and on which ground Abundio could guide or show Preciado the direction to Comala for claiming rights from Pedro Paramo, as Abundio knows it better than anybody that Pedro Paramo died many days back. The only solution at the reader's hand is to remove the Time's grasp over the episodes of the novel so that the reader can think everything happens in the novel in a state of timelessness and nothing happens here before or after another. The reader can then think that in Pedro Páramo Time past and Time future have magically merged in Time present. This may drive away the logical incongruity that the arrival of Preciado cannot be possible when Abundio is deaf and Pedro Paramo is already dead. It then becomes a magical reality that Abundio's killing Pedro Paramo, Dolores's dying advice to Preciado for coming to Comala for claiming rights from his father, and Preciado's arrival at Comala- all are taking place together in an eternal plane of simultaneousness.

However, a few lines later in the same chapter, a different explanation for the deafness is provided. It tells that Abundio became deaf 'when one of those big rockets we use to scare off water snakes went off too close to his head' (16). This inconsistent information again breaks any possible linear chain of events. The same deafness is explained by two different sets of events. At first sight, it may appear as a cubic picture seen from two different angles and perspectives. But, as the Time references of those two sets of events do not converge on the same point of time, we cannot put the two cases of Abundio's deafness as a single event of a particular realistic time. On the contrary, we have to set aside the time dimension of these events and have to believe that the same event, running through an accumulation of past and present, is magically 'many in one'. Thus, the event of Abundio's deafness becomes several events together, getting rid of the grip of a certain localised and specifiable Time.

However, Chapter 9 itself establishes a linear flow of Time. The conversation between Preciado and Eduviges Dyada about the events of a certain time, when Preciado's mother was alive, gives the events of this chapter a label of being 'Temporal' and a specifiable location in Time. That Time also seems live and moving with its progression of events brought about or accomplished by people pertaining to some specific Time and Locale. This Time-specific progression of events again faces a serious setback in Chapter 10. This chapter again leads to some nowhere and to some no-time. Only one character called Pedro Paramo appears here from the earlier realistic and main stream of events. He is seen in this .chapter talking to some Rogelio who keeps no traceable relationship with the story. Some 'Grandmother' is also seen reappearing in this chapter without clarifying whose grandmother she is, or was, or will be. One 'you' is mentioned just at the beginning of the chapter without even providing any clue who this 'you' might refer to. As a result Time does not bind the events of this chapter to any specific anchor or point of Time and thus Time lets them take place magically in a sort of Timelessness.

Time past and Time present again merge together in Chapter 17. Preciado puts up at Eduviges Dyada's house following the advice of Abundio who, too, had bubbled up on the surface of Time from the pit of the past. It is late into the night and Dyada, being a prostitute, gets out naturally in search of customers. Preciado falls into a fitful sleep and suddenly hears a fierce cry "Ay-y-y-y, life! I am too good for you" (31). It is such a high-pitched cry that Preciado sits bolt upright, as if it had sounded in his ear. It seems to be sticking to the walls of the room. The time of this cry seems to be conforming to the Time-line of Preciado's arrival and stay at Comala. But when Damiana enters the room and gives a factual explanation of what has happened, the cry is then evaporated from the present Time of Preciado's stay at Comala. Damiana explains that it is not any living cry of this moment. "It may be some echo trapped in here. A long time ago they hanged Toribio Aldrete in this room." This is the cry of that dying man which magically reaches Preciado's ear. The cry then seems to have fused up Time present and Time past together. This is the magical treatment of Time once again asserting its presence in Chapter 17.

Thus, the flow of temporal events interspersed with the timeless ones moves on and we find chapter 28 just as some bubbles of events appearing from the chasm of the Timelessness. The total chapter consists of merely these four lines composed of just a few separate and disconnected words which best resemble some bubbles upon a flowing stream of words:

Sounds. Voices. Murmurs. Distant singing:
My sweetheart gave me a lace-bordered
handkerchief to dry my tears. . .
High voices. As if it were women singing. (45)

The disconnected and abrupt arrangement of these words reasonably reminds anybody of their emergence from some chasm of unbridged thoughts. The gaps among those thoughts are unbridged possibly because the rise of those thoughts does not pertain to any definite Time. Consequently, the bubbles of those thoughts float on in an anarchic and chaotic Timelessness resisting any attempt of

bridging or connecting them together. Rulfo consciously strings them together in this way drawing our notice to their pertinence to the Timelessness.

Then in the beginning of chapter 32, Rulfo straightway brings into the text the question of necessary difference in the properties of Time in a magic realistic text from the realistic life. "It was as if time had turned backward. Once again I saw the star nestling close to the moon. Scattering clouds. Flocks of thrushes. And suddenly, bright afternoon light" (54). Rulfo indirectly admits here that in a land of magic realistic creeds time can easily and believably turn backward, and the evening can move backward to bring back the afternoon and its sun.

Chapter 36 then disrupts the order of Time established by three previous chapters. Chapter 36 presents Juan Preciado as a dead man talking to a dead woman Dorotea:

"Are you trying to make me believe you drowned, Juan Preciado? I found you in the town plaza, far from Donis's house, and he was there, too, telling me you were playing dead. Between us we dragged you into the shadow of the arches, already stiff as a board, and all drawn up like a person who'd died of fright. If there hadn't been any air to breathe that night you're talking about, we wouldn't have had the strength to carry you, even less bury you. And as you see bury you we did." (57)

Preciado who is narrating his story of visiting his father's land is now dead whereas his act of narration is running on. This refers to a time that magically commingles the time after death and the time before death. It is a time after death as the narration involves an event that has taken place after the narrator's death. At the same time, it is a time before death as the narrator is supposed to tell his story in his lifetime to someone living. This blend of two separate spheres of time into one actually sets the total event in a timeless sphere.

Hence, two spheres of time are again found blended together if Chapter 42 and Chapter 44 are juxtaposed and viewed in a linear progress of time. Chapter 42 presents a conversation among some dead persons in their graves. They are talking about Dona Susana who has just died and has settled as a new inhabitant in that particular graveyard:

" Was that you talking, Dorotea?"

"Who, me? I was asleep for a while. Are you still afraid?"

"I heard someone talking. A woman's voice. I thought it was you."

"A woman's voice? You thought it was me? It must be that woman who talks to herself. The one in the large tomb. Dona Susanita. She's buried close to us. The damp must have got to her, and she's moving around in her sleep." (76-77)

Chapter 44, on the other hand, presents Pedro Paramo's cry for Susana. He laments his lot that never favoured him to get Susana as his wife or Paramour. This cry obviously pertains to the time before the death of Susana but Susana is already dead as is shown in Chapter 42. So, if we take the account of chapter 42 to be naturally preceding what happens to Susana in Chapter 44, 45, 47, 48, & 49, then Time gets disrupted and loses its realistic linear flow contributing to its magic realistic aspect.

The end of Chapter 59 and the beginning of Chapter 60 again put forth a conflict of time if viewed in a realistic perspective. Chapter 59 ends with a sentence that bears a reference to Susana San Juan. The sentence suggests that Susana San Juan is no longer living in this world. Her death was, of course, more certainly confirmed in chapter 42. But, Chapter 60 starts presenting Susana San Juan vigorously alive and talking to some Justina. The only possible explanation involves the possibility of a backward movement of Time. The reality that allows Time to flow backward can be nothing less than being magical. The conversation between Susana and Justina, that disrupts the linear flow of Time and sets the two events as temporally irreconcilable, occurs in the text after a magical picture of reality drawn through some metaphors, as we can see below:

As dawn breaks, the day turns, stopping and starting. The rusty gears of the earth are almost audible: the vibration of this ancient earth overturning darkness.

"Is it true that night is filled with sins, Justina?"
"Yes, Susana."
"Really true?"
"It must be, Susana." (107)

In these instances, the episodes fail to coexist because the Time of one episode imposes a realistic impossibility on the Time of another episode. The result is that the possibility of both the Time, and the event can be accommodated in magic reality alone. We have seen this result minutely in these instances. The sharper and more magical treatment of Time is nevertheless another major aspect that envelops the whole novel. It is rather unanimously agreed by the critics that the events of Pedro Páramo simultaneously pertain to two worlds- the world of the living and the world of the dead. This unanimous verdict however has one strong implication that the events of the novel simultaneously belong to the Time before Death and to the Time beyond or after Death. All the characters of the novel are somewhere between Death and Life.

They are all alive and at the same time dead. Consequently, the actions involving them obviously take place simultaneously in two separate spheres of Time. Thus, the Time of the whole novel lapses into an impossible time, which is timelessness as a result of its simultaneously belonging to the Time before Death and the Time after Death. This macro level interpretation of Time in Pedro Páramo sets the whole novel in a timeless setting, which is, so far as we

know, a unique example in the magic realistic novels of Latin America.

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