

The Emergence of Modernism in the 20th Century Latin-American Literature

Dr S. Rema Devi

Associate Professor of English

School of Liberal Arts and Special Education, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education
Krishnankoil, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract:

The contemporary Latin America comprises of Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela etc. The literature produced in the Spanish speaking countries of the Western Hemisphere is called Latin American literature. It encompasses works in several languages. The earlier works include both oral and written literature. One of the significant literary movements that swept through Latin America, was Modernismo or Modernism, which was distinct with the New World modulation. The Nicaraguan Rubén Darío, the first great poet in the Spanish language, since Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, was the leader of this movement. The spark ignited by Modernismo was immense, that the poets were on the hunt for representation of originality in all works. The next important artistic movement in Latin America was the avant-garde, or the vanguardia, as it is known in Spanish. This movement reflected several European movements, especially Surrealism. The repercussions of Surrealism reverberated in Latin America throughout the 20th century. These repercussions produced distinctive modifications in Latin American arts and literature and consequently, several masterworks in literature and in plastic arts and painting. Modernismo was a renovation of poetic form and techniques, extending to the use of free verse. The present paper focuses on the emergence of modernism in the late 19th and the early 20th century Latin American Literature.

Keywords: Latin American Literature, Modernism, Boom Novels, 20th Century

The contemporary Latin America comprises of Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Cuba, Haiti, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Paraguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, Saint Martin and Saint Barthelemy. The part of the earth which comprises North and South America is called the Western Hemisphere. The literature produced in the Spanish speaking countries of the Western Hemisphere is called Latin American literature. It encompasses works in several languages. The earlier works include both oral and written literature. Before the Spanish conquest, the Aztecs and the Mayans prevailed in large numbers in these regions. They are people of the Mesoamerican civilization. The Mayans are still popular for their hieroglyphic script. This script refers to the earlier writing system of the Mayan civilization. The present paper focuses on the emergence of modernism in the late 19th and the early 20th century Latin American Literature.

Modernism:

The first significant literary movement in the history of Latin America is Barroco de Indias. The next significant literary movement that swept through Latin America, was Modernismo or Modernism, which was distinct with the New World modulation. The Nicaraguan Rubén Darío, the first great poet in the Spanish language, since Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, was the leader of this movement. *Azul*, which meant *Blue*, was Darío's popular volume of poetry and poetic prose. It was written in 1888. The book with an enriched dollop of modernism was turning point in both Spanish and Latin American literature.

In France, Rimbaud, a poet was an active advocate of modernism and preached that "one must be absolutely modern." Darío, who was pioneering the French symbolist poetry, was highly influenced by Rimbaud and named the movement as Modernism. This movement focused on writing poetry on aesthetic beauty and discarded the sentimentality, along with the rhetoric of Romanticism. Darío was courageous enough to experiment with metrics, with the accentuation of verse, with the inner rhythm of prose, with rhyme, and with asymmetrical stanzas to create a sonorous, musical language. He wrote on erotic themes. He was obsessed by Exoticism, especially by the "Oriental" subjects and objects. Darío's life was unconventional, which never affected the spreading of his poetic gospel. He travelled far and wide and lived in various Latin American

countries like Chile, Argentina, and Cuba and inflamed the Spanish literary scene. He began with a daring title, namely *Prosas profanas*, which meant *Lay Prose*. It was written in 1896 and was later translated into English as *Prosas Profanas and Other Poems*. *Unorthodoxy was conspicuous in both subject and form*. Dario's haughtiness, soberness and maturity was, later, well reflected in his "Cantos de vida y esperanza" which was "Songs of Life and Hope", published in 1905. In "Songs of Life and Hope", he introduces political topics, assuming in one memorable poem, entitled "Oda a Roosevelt", an anti-American, anti-Protestant attitude while asserting a pan-Hispanic identity, a position generally apparent in the English-language volume titled *Selected Poems*, which was published in 1965.

Dario's fellow *modernistas* included the Cubans José Martí and Julián del Casal, the Colombian José Asunción Silva, and the Mexicans Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera and Amado Nervo. The early death of these people, in one way or the other, curtailed the reach and duration of the movement. However, among all the members of the *modernistas*, Martí gradually rose to the position of a rival of Dario, owing to his political involvement and achievement in the war of Cuban independence and subsequently, his death in the battle field. Though Martí was a towering figure in poetry, equaling Dario, he was implausible in journalism and oratory. He wrote perceptive sketches of American life, and this was easy for him on account of the many years he spent in New York City. He also wrote numerous pieces for Latin American periodicals as well as for his own *Patria*, a newspaper he edited in New York. His *Versos libres* or "Free Verses" and *Versos sencillos* or "Simple Verses", translated into English, were innovative, subtle, and powerful. Of these two books, the latter was published in 1891 and the former, posthumously. Some stanzas of the brief, haiku-like "simple verses" have attained wide currency put to song in the popular "Guantanamera." His essay *Tres documentos de nuestra America* which was originally written in 1979, was published in 1891, translated into English as "Nuestra América", which meant "Our America". It was a manifesto in favour of Latin American cultural and political independence.

The 20th Century:

The spark ignited by Modernismo was immense, that the poets were on the hunt for representation of originality in all works. The next important artistic movement in Latin

America was the avant-garde, or the *vanguardia*, as it is known in Spanish. This movement reflected several European movements, especially Surrealism. The repercussions of Surrealism reverberated in Latin America throughout the 20th century. These repercussions produced distinctive modifications in Latin American arts and literature and consequently, several masterworks in literature and in plastic arts and painting. Modernismo was a renovation of poetic form and techniques, extending to the use of free verse. Nevertheless, on the whole, the experiments remained within accepted and traditional prosodic molds. The *vanguardia*, on the other hand, instituted a radical search for new, daring, confrontational themes and shockingly novel forms.

The above said changes occurred at different paces in various genres. Of all genres, poetry was the most daring and quick to adapt the changes, because the receptive audience was smaller, when compared to other genres. The first half of the 20th century beheld the erudition of many fine poets like Chileans Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro, Nicanor Parra, and Pablo Neruda; Mexican Octavio Paz; Cubans Nicolás Guillén and José Lezama Lima; Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos; Argentines Jorge Luis Borges and Oliverio Girondo; and Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal. Among these poets, Gabriela Mistral, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz were Nobel laureates. In the wake of Modernismo and against its innovations and aspirations, which though were later worn out, *vanguardista* poetry freed itself from prosodic constraints and the pursuit of sublime beauty, choosing instead to seek the poetic in the prosaic and to delve into the inner recesses of the self, no matter how dark. In this group, Neruda, Paz, Jorge Luis Borges and José Lezama Lima were noteworthy. *Residencia en la Tierra*, written sometime between 1925 and 1935, and which meant *Residence on Earth*, ignited the flow of poetry. The torrent of poetry set by the movement had no restrictions and used Surrealist free-association techniques, flowing in a blank verse. This style was extravagant and fertile in imagery. Some of them were metaphors of sexual impulses, too. The disregard for order and limit was apparent. At times, it sounded to be a poetry, expressing the deep despair of city dwellers seeking a more direct contact with nature and the purer sources of life.

Neruda was able to focus his poetic impulses after a political conversion brought about by the Spanish Civil War, which took place from 1936 to 1939. After this event, he sought

a collective voice, less focused on the individual self and more attuned to the vast injustices of history, which he gives a biblical dimension requiring biblical punishments and atonements. All these culminated in the composition of an epic poem entitled *Canto general*, which was written in 1950 and was translated into English under the same title, *Canto General*. This masterpiece of Neruda incorporates the stroke of Latin American history from pre-Columbian times to the mid-20th century. The voice of the narrator in the poem is that of Neruda, retelling the infinite sequence of incidents, encompassing the various atrocities and injustices visited upon the downtrodden in Latin America. Something significant of this poem is that the retelling the voices the commentary of Neruda, though he tells that it is a “General Song” and not a “song of myself”. Though the poem is unmindful of its weaknesses and encompasses elements of prosaic pamphleteering, it exhibits that it is a paean to the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. This dedication to Stalin would have been on account of Neruda’s membership in the Chilean Communist Party. The drawback of being a little prosaic was overcome by its sheer poetic thrust, attaining the magnificence of such sections as “Alturas de Macchu Picchu” (“Heights of Machu Picchu”) – an ascent to the ancient Inca citadel that ranks with the greatest poetry of the Western canon, including that of Dante and John Milton. During the closing days of his poetic career, Neruda, in spite of his versatility, turned to simple forms on simple topics—namely, his *Odas elementales*. Written in 1954, *Odas elementales* meant *Elementary Odes*, in English and comprised of songs in praise of an artichoke, wood, etc.

Paz too was a Republican activist, like Neruda, during the Spanish Civil War, but the war experience turned him away from communism and all other political movements. His poetic flair resembles that of Neruda in poems like *Piedra de Sol*, written in 1957 and meant *Sun Stone*, in English. Paz had a taste for erotic themes, too. The major poetic works of Paz are enclosed in the 1960 edition of *Libertad bajo palabra*. It was first published in 1949; it meant “Freedom under Parole”. The poems that appeared in the 1960 edition are included in the English-language volume, entitled *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957–1987* and was published in 1987. In *Piedra de Sol* Paz ponders time, in terms of the Aztec calendar, and time’s nemesis, love or eros, which seeks to perpetuate the fleeting moment in the ecstasy of pleasure. Paz was obsessed by the projection of the past into the present; thus he was fascinated by ruins, those of ancient Mexico and the Classical ruins in Sicily, where the Greco-Roman past seems to live. An example of this is the

“Hymn among Ruins”, which was originally entitled “Himno entre ruinas”. Paz had a Classical mind. In his writing, the forms which seemed to be outdated, reappeared in new contexts. Paz was always able to convey the melancholic feeling of the delusion of difference between the past and the present – he advocated that everything is the same, only our individual consciousness is dissolved by death. His melancholic tone is felt to the maximum in his brief poems like “Certeza”, which meant “Certainty”, and in longer compositions, such as “Entre lo que veo y digo”, which meant “Between What I See and What I Say”. These poems are encompassed in the above said volume of *Collected Poems*.

The Modern Novel:

The Vanguardia movement did not have an impact on prose fiction, initially. Though the novel was renovated, it was confined within the 19th-century Realist forms. The then contemporary novels written during the Mexican Revolution were considered to be modern. The revolution took place from 1910-20 and thereby, the then novels were classified modern novels. These novels were very close to Classical Tragedy, thus adhering to conventional forms. Moreover, these novels presented an unsentimental, harsh, and action-packed world of wanton cruelty, with crisp plots in which the characters seem to be propelled by superior forces, which again was an attribute of the classical tragedy forms. The best-known among these by far was *Los de abajo* by Mariano Azuela. It was written in 1915 and was entitled *The Underdogs*, in English. The Mexican Revolution had a strong impact on the contemporary fiction that the theme continued to dominate Mexican fiction for a good part of the 20th century. Gradually, a group of novels came into existence, grouped under the rubric *novelas de la tierra*, or *novela criollista*. It meant regionalist novels or “novels of local colour”. These novels were widely read and attained some international recognition. The most notable were three by authors who acquired prominent places in Latin American literary history. They were – *Don Segundo Sombra*, written in 1926, by the Argentine author Ricardo Güiraldes, *Doña Bárbara*, written in 1929, by the Venezuelan author Rómulo Gallegos, and *La vorágine* by José Eustasio Rivera, a Colombian, in 1924. The three novels had a collective feature – all the three were set in rural contexts. They, equally, depicted man’s struggle to tame nature and make it subservient and bountiful. Moreover, they describe the

toil within a given national industry: *Doña Bárbara* and *Don Segundo Sombra* depict cattle ranching in the Venezuelan and Argentine plains of the Llano and the Pampa, respectively, and *La vorágine* describes rubber prospecting in the Colombian jungle.

The mighty struggle against nature reaches transcendental proportions and in all cases approaches allegory and myth: man against nature, civilization against barbarism, and good against evil. These are powerful novels, with memorable characters, such as the old gaucho Don Segundo Sombra and the alluring and controlling Doña Bárbara, the “Devourer of Men.” In the novel *La vorágine*, the jungle is portrayed as the protagonist, a relentless and merciless force. The regionalist novel dramatized the Latin American quest to define its culture. The genre was so productive that the literary tradition called *novela de la tierra* became a touchstone to scale the later novelistic projects.

In Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, a compatible literary tradition emerged, getting accustomed to the rebelliousness, skepticism, and contentiousness of the avant-garde. The leader of this tradition was Jorge Luis Borges. On contrary to the regional novels which pooled direct, unmediated versions of Latin American reality, Borges painted the bookish version of the nation, an attribute derived from the Western tradition. Borges did not fail to notice the redundant tales of Greek and biblical myths, in the gaucho tales, too. He observed that there were only repetitions of the same old world and there was no fresh stories from the new world. He mastered the tale based on apocryphal references and sources and programmatically rejected long fiction, declaring that some novels are as boring as life itself. *Historia universal de la infamia*, written in 1935 and entitled *A Universal History of Infamy* in English, was the first collection of short stories of Borges. In these stories, he began to experiment with apocryphal attributions and bogus bibliographies. His fiction constantly underscored crime and villainy, telling tales of various adventurous criminal protagonists. *Ficciones*, written in 1944 and later translated into English, was Borges’ best known collection and consists of his classics, such as “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “La muerte y la brújula”, meaning the “Death and the Compass”, and “Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*”, meaning “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quijote*”. These texts unsettled the norms of realist fiction from within that they made regionalist novels appear obsolete. Borges claimed that the regionalist novelists invented their own countries and he parodied the procedures of the regionalist novelists

in “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”. He felt that the regionalist novelists did something contrary in creating their own countries, despite their disingenuous claims of faithfully reflecting reality. By 1944, regionalist fiction was retreating. Avant-garde narrative forms, of which some were drawn from sources belonging to African or Indian cultures, began to prevail.

One of the main impulses of the avant-garde approach in all the arts was to incorporate indigenous and African artistic traditions into the mainstream of Latin American life. The Mexican mural paintings were the outcome of this trend, in painting. In literature, the African or Indian stories were retold in Spanish. They were also weaved into larger narratives. In 1930, the Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias published his *Leyendas de Guatemala*, meaning “Legends of Guatemala”, in which he retold Maya stories drawn from the oral tradition of his country. Lydia Cabrera, a Cuban, wrote *Cuentos negros de Cuba*, in 1940. It meant *African Stories from Cuba*. Among the various narrative projects of this genre, the works of Carbera was significant. Larger projects, such as the Ecuadorean Jorge Icaza’s *Huasipungo*, which was written in 1934 and meant *Huasipungo: The Villagers*, had a more decidedly political edge. It depicted the Indians as victims of brutal oppressions and economic exploitations.

The regionalist and *vanguardista* trends merged more successfully in two landmark Latin American novels. These novels inaugurated what has come to be known as “magical realism”. There were many narrative projects in this genre. However, two of them gained much popularity – Asturias’s “*El señor presidente*”, which was written in 1946 and meant *The President* and Alejo Carpentier’s “*El reino de este mundo*”, written in 1949, meaning *The Kingdom of This World*. The former novel was about the dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera in Guatemala. In this novel, surrealist techniques have been employed to create an impression of fear and the sense that events are guided by supernatural forces, echoing Native American beliefs. In the second of the above mentioned works, Carpentier writes about Haiti from 1750 to 1820, including the Haitian revolution at the end of the 18th century, which was carried out by slaves in commerce. In this novel, too, the author has interspersed with the supernatural forces of nature harnessed by their leaders. Magic realism consists in the depiction of the fantastic from the point of view of those who, whether their religion be Roman Catholic or some doctrine of indigenous or African origin, accept as true the extra natural aspects of their faith in the context of a narrative that is otherwise

realistic according to traditional standards. In 1955, Carpentier published a collection of stories. These stories were written in the 1940s and the early 1950s. The title of the work was *Guerra del tiempo*, which meant *War of Time* and was a work of prototypical expression of magic realism. Thus, Asturias and Carpentier successfully combined regionalist and avant-garde trends, bridging the new Latin American novel of the 1960s and '70s, the years of the so-called “boom” of the Latin American novel.

Juan Rulfo was a Mexican writer of the transitional age. However, confining him to the transition would never do justice because his works were of such high quality. His collection of short stories, *El llano en llamas* was published in 1953. It meant “The Plain in Flames,” and was translated into English as *The Burning Plain and Other Stories*. *Pedro Páramo*, a novel by him, written in 1955 and translated into English by the same name, was among the best works of fiction, ever published in Latin American literature. The rural characters created by Rulfo were the victims of the Mexican Revolution. In the stories, the laconic narrators tell about their stark, violent lives, reduced to dramatic situations so primal that they approximate myths.

Pedro Páramo is a brief masterpiece about the lives affected by a tyrannical country chieftain, whose limitless ambitions were not satisfied with money and power. The story is told by multiple narrators, some of whom speak from their graves, and it is redolent with violence, unbridled lust, and incest. It resembled *Inferno*, in a small-scale. It also presented techniques such as stream of consciousness, flashbacks, and the employment of various narrators. The ambiguity in presenting voices for various narrators was that sometimes it was difficult to identify. In addition to a collection of film scripts, he published only these two books, which showed that he was a perfectionist. In spite of the limited publications, Rulfo secured his place in Latin American literary history.

The second half of the 20th century witnessed the recognition and honouring of poets like Pablo Neruda, from Chile and Octavio Paz from Mexico and the novelists Miguel Ángel Asturias of Guatemala and Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia. They were honoured with Nobel Prizes. With the recognition given for literature, people with a literary flair were recognized and appreciated worldwide. The Argentine Jorge Luis Borges was widely accepted as a modern

classic; Cuba's Alejo Carpentier and novelists Juan Rulfo (Mexico) and João Guimarães Rosa (Brazil) were also internationally recognized.

Despite these recognized literary figures, the literary boom involved the figures of García Márquez, Argentina's Julio Cortázar, the Mexican Carlos Fuentes, and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, the Uruguayan Juan Carlos Onetti, the Chilean José Donoso, and the Cubans José Lezama Lima and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. There was something unique about these writers – they adopted the style and the techniques of the modern European and American novels. The American writers who influenced the boom writers were Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway. The other characteristics of the boom novels were:

- Stream of consciousness
- Multiple and unreliable narrators
- Fragmented plots
- Interwoven stories
- Strong influence of the cinema
- Other modern techniques, ignored by the regionalist novelists

The boom writers incorporated these techniques in the Latin American themes, stories, and situations. This added a new hue to the Latin American prose fiction. Along with these techniques, some writers like Cortázar, García Márquez, and Cabrera Infante spiced their writings with a relatively infrequent element called humour. Some writers were known for their frankness, when they wrote about sensual and sexual themes.

The Boom Novels:

Cien años de soledad, written in 1967, and later translated into English as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by García Márquez, is, still, a world-class masterpiece that has entered the canon of Western literature. This book is considered to be the epicenter of the boom novels, though the books by the above mentioned boom writers gained worldwide recognition. This novel tells the story of Macondo, a small town in the jungle, from its foundation to its being destroyed by a hurricane a century later. These stories of Macondo heralded Macondo-ism that demanded of all

aspiring writers that they set their tales in steamy tropical jungles in which the fantastic and the real happily coexisted *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, *The Death of Artemio Cruz* in English was written in 1962, by Fuentes. It revisited the theme of the Mexican Revolution and explored its aftermath of corruption and power struggles among the revolutionaries. Following it came the book entitled *Rayuela*, written in 1963 and translated into English as *Hopscotch*, by Cortázar. It was the second central novel of boom literature. It echoed the antics and adventures of an Argentine bohemian exiled in Paris and his return to Buenos Aires.

Another work by name *The Time of the Hero*, originally written as *La ciudad y los perros* in 1963, by Vargas Llosa, won the prestigious Seix Barral Prize in Spain. It centred on the brutal life of cadets in a military school. The other important novels of the period were Onetti's *El astillero*, penned in 1961 and entitled *The Shipyard* in English, a dark tale about a pimp with ambitions; *Coronación*, written in 1962 and titled in English as *Coronation* by Donoso, a sardonic chronicle of the Chilean middle to upper-middle class; *Tres tristes tigres* which meant *Three Trapped Tigers* in English and written in 1967, by Cabrera Infante, a hilariously funny yet sombre portrayal of Havana on the eve of the Cuban Revolution; and Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*, written in 1966 and entitled in English as *Paradiso*, a deeply poetic novel of education that created a scandal because of its homoerotic thematic. Though some of the novels of the beginning of the writing career of Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, and Donoso did not gain popularity, their later novels turned out to be better or more significant. Fuentes's *Terra Nostra*, written in 1975, was renamed the same in English as *Terra Nostra*. This novel of him was more ambitious than anything else that he had written; Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, was written in 1970 and was entitled *The Obscene Bird of Night* in English. It was more daring than his earlier or later fiction; and Vargas Llosa's *La guerra del fin del mundo*, penned in 1981 and renamed as *The War of the End of the World* in English is of epic proportions and ambitions. In fact, Vargas Llosa's and Fuentes's production after the boom was on the whole considerably better than their earlier work.

Manuel Puig and Severo Sarduy were an Argentine and a Cuban, respectively. They were close on the heels of the boom writers. Though their themes were similar to that of the boom writers, they wrote originally, in an innovative manner. Though they were not the exclusive writers of taboos, they often wrote on those controversial topics, in Latin American literature. The most

common taboo in their writings was homosexuality. Puig's use of popular culture like film, song, serial novels was masterful. He published a series of excellent works beginning with *La traición de Rita Hayworth*, written in 1968 and retitled as *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* in English. His best work, *El beso de la mujer araña*, was written in 1976. In English it was *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a masterpiece that became a widely acclaimed film. The book centres on a political activist, who happens to share a cell in an Argentine jail with a gay man. The novel was power packed with dialogues that revealed strong emotions and feelings, also disclosing makes powerful statements about Latin American culture.

Sarduy, who lived in exile in Paris, was involved with the Structuralist group Tel Quel, active there in the 1960s and '70s. he was a step ahead Puig in the theoretical approach. Something unique about his novels was that his protagonists were often transvestites. Sarduy's works such as *De donde son los cantantes* (1967; *From Cuba with a Song*), *Cobra* (1972; Eng. trans. *Cobra*), and *Maitreya* (1978; Eng. trans. *Maitreya*) are books of exquisite, disturbing beauty, written with a sense of global doom. Most of his books were written in an elaborate yet playful prose, with tightly woven plots.

Miguel Barnet, a Cuban writer, was younger to Puig and Sarduy and contributed generously to a narrative trend. This trend was later called "testimonial narrative". His *Biografía de un cimarrón* or *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, written in 1966 was a forerunner of this testimonial narrative genre. In his books, a writer interviews a person from a marginal social group and transcribes the result in the first person. Despite the writing of the testimonial narrative books in large numbers, only Barnet's transcription of the centenarian former slave and Maroon Esteban Montejo gained popularity.

References:

Echevarría, Roberto González. "A Brief History of the History of Spanish American Literature." The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature, edited by Roberto Gonzalez Echevarría and Enrique Pupo-Walker, vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 7–32. The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature.



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin_American_literature

<https://www.britannica.com/art/Latin-American-literature>