

THE POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION AND CULTURAL SEMIOTICS IN JULIA ALVAREZ'S *SAVING THE WORLD*

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ABSTRACT

*Creativity is a problematic term in contemporary literary critique. It draws attention towards the major difficulties faced by women writers and evaluates the status of women writers with regard to their position in the male-dominated society. The analysis delves into the unconventional attitudes taken by the female protagonist Alma Heubner, a Latina writer in Julia Alvarez's *Saving the World* and the resistance shown by her to the First World male-centered literary world. The study shows how the woman novelist has appropriated her writings into a subversive force that challenges the phallogentric organization of society. The Polish psychiatrist Kasimierz Dabrowski discusses in his book, *Positive Disintegration*, how some neuroses become the benign source for literary / artistic creativity. The following study examines psychological factors that qualify the woman character- writer's life, how the female writer-protagonist's psychic conflicts related to her gender and sexuality turn out to be artistically productive, offering a new dimension to women's writings. This also examines how Alma Heubner offers resistance to her cultural "Othering." The life of this female writer-character certainly becomes instrumental in creating a change in the social psyche, the collective unconscious of the readers, especially women readers.*

KEY WORDS: Positive Disintegration, commodification, Othering, Semiotics

Woman in creativity has to deal with the male conceptions of creativity. The one who refuses to conform to the norms of femininity are labeled neurotic. Though woman is defined by sexuality, she is not permitted to enjoy her sexuality in the patriarchal society. There are different sites of resistance for women in this phallogentric universe. One is writing. Women have to rewrite the "normal" female sexuality. Quite often, psychic disorders have become a metaphor in women's literature.

Modern concepts of unconscious, the site of creativity and madness, are associated with the theories of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Lawrence Kubie. The object relations theorists like Heinz Kohut stress the role of "object relations" in the formation and functioning of personality. Many like Albert Rothenberg argue that there is some sort of

relationship between creativity and madness. The writers may use the image of madness as a strategy to reflect the age in which they live. At times, psychic disorders like writer's block may be advantageous for them and work as a sign for positive disintegration as stated by Kazimierz Dabrowski in his book, *Positive Disintegration*.

Kazimierz Dabrowski, in his *Positive Disintegration*, argues that some neuroses, even psychoses, may be benign. Personality develops primarily through dissatisfaction with and the fragmentation of one's existing psychic structure. Stimulated by a lack of harmony in the self and in adaptation to the strains of the external environment, the individual "disintegrates." Anxiety, neurosis and psychosis may be symptoms of the disintegration and they mark a retrogression to a lower level of psychic functioning. Finally reintegration occurs at a higher level and the personality evolves to a new plateau of psychic health. Dabrowski points out that these new integrations at "higher" levels seem to happen to people of high intelligence and marked creative powers. That is, after the disintegration of illness and their symptoms, there comes the reintegration at a higher creative level in creative geniuses. As the creators prefer to choose their conflicts or some aspects of their life or personality, to work on, they could reflect the inner and outer world in their works.

Julia Alvarez, a Dominican-American, is regarded as one of the most critically and commercially successful Latina writers of this century. Her *Saving the World* written in 2006 received *The Washington Post Book World's* Best Fiction Award in the same year. Alvarez, the recipient of multitude awards like The Hispanic Heritage Award, depicts the stories of two women separated by two hundred years in her *Saving the World*.

Saving the World gives a brilliant rendering of a Latina woman writer turning fifty, struggling middle age and depression. This novel is a novel within a novel. Alma Huebner, a contemporary successful Dominican-American writer suffers from writer's block. Alma's husband, Richard Huebner, an American, is involved with a project of testing a new vaccine in the Dominican Republic to save the world from AIDS in this twenty first century. She decides to write about Isabel of the historical Balmis' expedition of 1803. The group comprised of nine attendants, twenty-two orphan boys under the age of nine, the ship's crew and the rectoress of the orphanage, Isabel Sendales y Gomez, who had joined mission voluntarily. These two stories outwardly so different, begin to converse through the narrators, Alma and Isabel, thus saving them from the world of hopelessness and dejection. Alvarez alternates between Isabel's first-person account of the mission and Alma's life in Vermont. Later, they are pictured as engaged in crusades against the afflictions of their day.

In the very beginning of the novel, the readers are introduced to Alma's varying moods of depression. She "is 'better' but numb all the time" (02). Tera's words on Alma's persisting sadness, soothes her friend, "*Depression is nothing but a first-world dis-ease* (she parcels out the word that way)." (03) "dusk, was the most often cited as the nadir of mood swings. She is standing at the window, not having had lunch yet or more accurately, not remembering if she has had lunch yet, ..." (04) Alma has already told to Dr. Payne, her psychiatrist that she "felt as if a whirling darkness were descending on her, like dirty water going down a drain or that flock of birds in the film by Hitchcock" (01). She is also reminded of her brief date with a man who accused her of having a "victim personality" (05). At first

she has felt that Dr. Payne could help her get back to her “old self” (01). All the antidepressants he had prescribed for her turned to be useless. Alma looks better, but has felt numb all the time. Nothing seems truly upset her. Her publishing agent, Lavinia, has sent her an ultimatum letter about her overdue novel for she is going on her third year overdue. She has replied her that the novel is done and she is merely going through it one last time. She has felt that her instincts are trustworthy and she has not told Richard emptying all the bottles of antidepressants into a small hole in the ground. She pretends that she is still taking them. “In these small ways Alma finds she can still trust herself” (02). She has every intention of returning to her old self. “But she has no story yet to lead her out of her dark mood and restore her to the life,” her old self (03).

Alma has readied herself for Richard’s death. Losing Richard is what she has been bracing herself for (16). She has always a premonition that he will die very soon after his parents’ death. A cardiac arrest, road accident or in some other way, the inevitable death is waiting for him. She has prepared herself for that day. So she bought a spiral notebook to take down the things which Richard did. She has learnt to hook up the generator, refill the water softener, program the thermostats and the like. When Richard asked why she wanted to learn plowing the driveway, she replied that so she could live without him. He taught her to plow, “though her terror of driving through drifting snow convinced her that she would probably die of a heart attack if she tried to do this herself” (17). She cannot bear Richard’s loss at any cost. At the same time, she hated infidelity, betrayal and divorce. Though she feels very insecure without Richard, she will not forgive him if he becomes a cuckold. Once she declares to him, “I’m not Hillary Clinton” (17). She has always trusted him, though the AIDS woman’s call misled her for some time. “It’s as if this new savvy self has splintered off, the smart wife who plays her cards right, uses magazine-article ploys to keep her man happy” (48). When Richard is not at home, Alma often feels a heaviness of heart. She says, “dusk, was the most often cited as the nadir of mood swings. She is standing at the window, not having had lunch yet or, more accurately, not remembering if she has had lunch yet...” (04). The intruder in the back pasture and the AIDS woman’s weird phone call had thrown her off completely before Richard reached home. She doubts at her own creative faculty, “oil fields of inner resources to tap” (14). It would make her feel good if she gets success in getting herself back on track. Alma describes herself as “active, slender, vegetarian, married” (01). She is childless. David, Ben and Sam are her stepsons. She is proud of her stepsons. In fact, having them does not help her. But she pretends that it does. After the publication of her first novel she married Richard. A family with husband and three stepsons was indeed a big challenge for her. “Nothing in the world like having children, her mother, who never seemed to enjoy having her own, would lecture Alma during the early years of her marriage... The idea of generating more family was terrifying” for her (16). Once in an effort to revivify her novel, she painted her study room with bright salmon colour to bring the atmosphere and ambience of tropics to her residence at Vermont. She painted the walls back to off-white within a week for the reason that the new colour was drowning out her characters. Alma watches her friend Tera the way she would a movie, a good movie, but one she has seen several times already and that, therefore, leaves her slightly bored. (03). Alma has explained

all these things to her psychiatrist that she is feeling “as if a whirling darkness were descending on her, like dirty water going down a drain or that flock of birds in the film by Hitchcock.” (01)

Alma has heard about the historical Balmis mission when she was preparing herself for the sequel to her second novel. She has not been writing anything for almost seven years. She is supposed to write on multigenerational saga of a Latino family. In the midst of the first part depicting the eighteenth century, she has become exhausted. The self-conscious ethnicity and the predictable conflicts of these people are extra discomforts for her. The advance which had given for the upcoming novel has already spent. Besides, very young hot Vanessa Von Leyden, popularly known as Veevee, has replaced her original old sweet editor Dorie.

Alma’s bitterness and disenchantment with the book-biz world is another reason for her loss of faith in her creative powers. The publishers are too demanding. Their marketing strategies include

the glamour shots; the prepub creation of buzz, as the publicity department calls it; the clubiness of the blurbing; and, then, the panels in which one of every flavor minority is asked to respond to some questionable theme: Coloring the Canon; The Future of the American Novel; Politics and the Postcolonial Writer (19).

Alma is of the impression that a writer will lose his/her freedom succumbing to the glamour of the book-biz world. She is forced to participate in all these publicity enhancing events managed by the publishing business tycoons. They have made her to pass herself off as a woman of colour. They have not let herself to be openly photographed. They have made her picture on the back cover look brown by showing her chiaroscuro face in the shadows. Alma’s pseudonym is “Fulana de Tal” which actually meant “a nobody, a so-and-so” (09). The articles which are meant to promote her, have always misquoted her remarks and distorted her biographic details to perpetuate her supposed ethnic identity. Papote, her father who has fled the dictatorship is misrepresented as someone who led a revolution in Dominican Republic and her grandmother as a Haitian. In fact, her grandmother “had been a French woman back when the whole island belonged to France” (20). These are all their attempts to preserve the writer’s anonymity. She has seemed helpless before the money minded editor. “In this tough publishing world, it was just too hard to sell a first novel by a writer who required total anonymity. You had to have a story to go with your stories.” Her *Fulana de Tal* has given her a different identity though some Spanish speakers, a minority in the U.S, have come to know that it meant nothing. Others will consider it as emblematic of the Latino condition in the USA. Besides, her publishers preferred a Latino name to an American name in the present charged multicultural climate. Under the pretext of promoting Latino authors to the mainstream, the publishers indeed have done a good business. The mystery around who she really is, has produced a buzz around her novels which certainly helped the big sale of her first novel.

Alma doubts whether she will be able to succeed in getting herself back on track. She consciously or unconsciously envisions writer’s block as a colossal boulder. She burdens her work with unreasonable and unrealistic expectations, which holds her back many a time. She was not sure whether she could finish the novel and afraid whether she would be able to

repeat her success. Here, the problem is not laziness or lack of commitment. She wanted to avoid the terrifying possibility of failure and write uninterruptedly without getting derailed by fear or distraction. She thus procrastinated because of her fear of failure combined with her perfectionism and over identification with her creative work. She wanted to escape the fear and anxiety surrounding the act of writing itself. It undermined her enthusiasm, and exacerbated her procrastination problem by creating more fear and made her counterproductive. These factors hindered her from writing the next best seller.

Alma began to have an aversion to her whole persona. She started to believe that writing under her pseudonym was actually bad luck and e-mailed to her publishers, "FULANA DE TAL IS DEAD" (22). She felt safer to write under her own name than her pseudonym. She thought that freedom would be gained with the loss of Fulana de Tal. Her publishers were of the opinion that her negative publicity after the publication of Mario Gonzalez-Echavarriga's article would increase the sale of her books.

Mario Gonzalez-Echavarriga, the patron of Latino critics, "deconstructed" Alma as *"Fulana de Tal is nothing but a Machiavellian user of identity. Her ridiculous pen name is an irresponsible attempt to undermine the serious political writing by voices long kept silent. Does this writer consider her ethnicity as a joke?"* (20). Alma's publishers decided to use his very negative criticism as a market opportunity by putting the "old, veiled picture on the cover and then a new full-face close-up in back" (22). Alma certainly knew very well that she was letting herself become an "ethnic performing monkey" and "her writing was nothing but a game of hide-and-seek with her readers" (22-3). Temporarily, she wanted to escape from the trauma and tremendous pressure created by the book-biz world. That was why she decided to flee to the nineteenth century.

Some factors contributing to Alma's writer's block are self-doubt, perfectionism, procrastination, unrealistic expectations, and fear of failure. The pressure to produce a good creative work against her usual style or within a limited time span creates problem for her. The burden put on the creative self seems to be too much for her, and she feels herself as blocked. At times, she is compelled to work against her natural inclination. Writing becomes especially competitive when writing a great novel is not enough in this era of globalization and commodification. It has to be a best seller. The present day authors are expected to sell themselves on talk shows, do interviews and to give advertisements in print as well as electronic media. They have to use even new media like computer, internet, mobile phone and the like by creating personal blogs and actively participating in social websites so that they can generate enough publicity to become a brand name. Thus the writer and his text become reduced to mere commodities. Alma does not want to make herself feel as a mere cipher or commodity.

Reading about history made Alma anxious to a great extent. Even then she chose a historical event for her novel. She says: "instead of feeling anxious or dreaming of intervening, Alma wants to go along with Isabel on the Balmis expedition" (18). Alma had collected information about Francisco Xavier Balmis and his smallpox expedition from university library using Tera's card. Her e-mail correspondence with a Spanish historian who tended the website on Balmis helped her a lot. She learnt that Balmis, married to Josefa

Mataseco and childless, was of her age when he embarked on smallpox expedition. He had already been to the New World four times. His smallpox expedition around the world from La Coruna in 1803 took almost three years to complete. Alma wants to write about this visionary man and the mysterious rectoress of the orphanage, Isabel.

She turned down the offer to go with Richard to the Dominican Republic, her native country saying that she was working on her novel. It had crossed her mind that that would be a chance to prove how authentically Latina she was by working with “poor campesinos” in the mountains (51). By living a life of her own style would definitely be a reaction to other people’s projections on her. Those people consider her only as an Other. She made an excuse, “moving involves distraction, meeting new people, reinventing your self again” (49).

The superstructure of the novel is formed from Alma’s attempts to write a novel on Isabel’s and Dr. Balmis’ real but little known story on royal smallpox expedition. *Saving the World* as a system is made up of different parts or signs in relation to one another. One can analyze the structure of the text with its unique narrative technique, character relations and of course through interrelated themes. The different characters in this textual system can be coded as signifiers linked to signified concepts. What they signify can have meaning only in relation to other signifiers or characters. Despite the significant difference in the age they belong, both Alma and Isabel are occupying the same function in the narrative and the meaning system of the novel. Both of them are portrayed against characters who represent contrary qualities. The textual signs certainly highlight how the characters in this textual system are coded negatively and positively.

The expedition can be viewed as both a sequence of episodes or events in the past and as a timeless pattern detectable in the contemporary world. Hence this story of Isabel and Dr. Balmis had a double structure, historical and ahistorical. The textual system as a network of signs brings together a variety of citations, echoes and cultural codes. The silent speech of the oppressed has just been reduced to a monotonous semiotic pattern. The act of signification has become naturalized.

Alma is forced to take a pseudonym for she is caught between two worlds – the Third World because of her Dominican Republican descent and the First World because she is married to a grigano or an American. She feels herself as both an insider and an outsider. As she hails from an ethnic background, her identity as a writer is commodified. Alma de Jesus Rodriguez or Mrs. Alma Huebner is renamed as Fulana de Tal which means “nobody.” “Her ridiculous pen name is an irresponsible attempt to undermine the serious political writing by voices long kept silent” (20). Her picture on her own book showed a mere face in the shadows which of course made her look brown in order to pass herself off as a woman of colour by the publishers. They are sure that they will sell more books than ever with her shadow picture signifying total anonymity. She has now been reduced to “an ethnic performing monkey” and her writing is “nothing but a game of hide-and-seek with her readers” (22). That is why Alma flees to the nineteenth century. She hates the ways of the book biz world where the ethnic writers are pigeonholed and have become products or commodities.

Alma identifies herself with Isabel, the thirty six year old rectoress of the nineteenth century. Isabel always hid her scarred face caused by smallpox before going into the world of men. She discards her veil and breaks her silence in her eagerness to go for an expedition with Dr. Balmis. But she is introduced to different people by Dr. Balmis and his colleagues with different surnames just like her orphans who when first come to her with no names. She feels nameless. Even history has forgotten to give her a surname whereas Dr. Francisco Balmis is glorified by his countrymen during the bicentennial celebrations of the Spanish Royal Philanthropic Expedition of 1803 in 2003. The oppressed women's nameless status is represented by Isabel and Alma. In the narration, at times, Alma is suffering from identity crisis: "Alma stays up late, as if to keep company with this lone woman..... wondering what the next forty days at sea will hold, whether her seasickness will return..... Don Francisco has forgiven her over the Benito matter...." (141). Isabel seemed to be a "strange creature" for the servants of the house arranged for the expedition members in San Juan: "A woman who had come with a medicine for the smallpox but who had obviously not had the benefit of the cure herself" (200). For the first time in months, she felt conscious of her scarred face. But she would never go back to covering herself. "Somewhere, mid sea, I had lost that much of my vanity" (200). But their guarded looks disappeared when they saw little Benito at her side. It was because "we shared a stronger bond, motherhood" (200). Benito brought a flower to his foster mother, "a flower dropped from the flame tree.....it seemed a heartbreakingly beautiful thing" (200). She was like the dropped flame flower, a woman with unfulfilled passions and emotions, a woman who was denied an ordinary life at the age of sixteen because of her scarred face due to smallpox. Isabel felt relieved when the steward got accidentally struck by the arrow intended for the seabirds. "I can put away my pin for now" (163).

When Balmis' faith started flagging thinking that someone might be infecting the boys deliberately sabotaging their expedition, Isabel consoled him, "History will remember you.... And your own time will celebrate you" (165). She always stood by him. Though Dr. Balmis did not seem particularly religious to Isabel, his words expressed Christian sentiments: "We must not live entirely, or even mainly, for our own time. The soul exceeds its circumstances" (165). But she was sure that he would exceed his circumstances. The small pox had been averted in San Juan before the arrival of Dr. Balmis and his team in San Juan. Isabel had an inkling of what was to come when she stepped in the Governor's house there. The British had already transported the vaccine encrusted on threads, a safer option. Dr. Oller had arranged it to be brought over on the arm of a slave girl. "I was the only one in our party who knew that this moment was the great calm before the storms such as we had experienced at the sea" (201). She did not lose hope and really wanted to save Dr. Balmis at any cost. "I now had a new mission. Don Francisco's faith was faltering. It was up to me to keep alive his belief in a dream that from the very beginning had been too deeply rooted in his self-esteem. I stayed back, and perhaps that was the night I felt the closest to him" (202).

The noble-hearted Isabel accompanies Dr. Francisco Balmis entrusted by King Carlos of Spain to vaccinate and save the people living in Central America, some parts of Africa and even Philippines. The same story is repeated in the twenty first century through Alma and

Richard who is employed by Emerson to go on a Third World project in the Dominican Republic to satisfy his business motives. Richard had been known as Dick among his family and social circle. Alma hated calling him as “Dick,” a name associated with connotative meanings. She started calling him as “Richard” and everyone followed it. “It’s one of the little changes she has brought about in his life that she prides herself on” (06). Alma’s thought about Richard’s impending death is given in the very first chapter himself. “Richard, her husband, overworked and project-driven, will probably not live that long” (01). Richard disliked the whole idea of cell phones saying “I don’t want to be reachable every moment of my day” (06). He lost both his parents and for some time he sank “into depression (even if he refuses to call it that)” (48). Once he had confessed his attempt of dying by drowning and hatred of watching pirate movies. Richard leaves for the Dominican Republic to set up a “green center” in the mountains for Help International managed by Emerson. He invited Alma to join him there for he knew that she hated the “world of book biz, the faxes and phone calls, the plague of e-mail” by Lavinia reminding of her overdue novel (50). His strange blue eyes always looked softly at her. It always shocked her to find “a mother’s cherishing gaze” on Richard’s face (50). She had never known such a gaze from her own mother. She had never thought it would come from a man.

Just like Isabel who tried to save Balmis from the rage of local Governors and Bishops in the new world, Alma rushes to her native land in order to save Richard who is kept as a hostage. Like Balmis who has died in Madrid when he was busy with his new smallpox expedition, Richard too is killed in the shoot-out in the AIDS clinic set up by him to save the Third World from epidemics. Isabel is saved from the rage of the world to carry the memory of her last expedition with Balmis. Alma too is saved from her twin hostage existence – physically from the so-called terrorists and mentally from the writer’s block to carry the memory of her last meeting with Richard.

In order to find relief from the psychic conflicts, both Alma and Isabel find refuge in their creative works. Alma finds it by writing a novel on Isabel and latter in her day-to-day record of events in the form of letters to her friends far away from her. The textual manifestation of their psychic conflicts is given in their works. So in their works the readers find forbidden subjects. That is, unconventional themes are presented in conventional form. There is a conflict between centripetal and centrifugal forces. As it is self-centered, there is a centripetal movement rather than centrifugal. There is also conflict between spatial and temporal elements, between signifier and signified just like the conflict between content and form. That is, there is a tug-of-war between phonic and graphic elements in the language used.

The creative work reduces anxiety for both the creator and the reader. Going through the writings on Balmis expedition gives a lot of relief to Alma. When she loses her husband, thoughts of Isabel have saved her from the feelings of numbness and even become a panacea for her writer’s block. The depression and the consequent writer’s block seem to become benign in the cases of both the narrators – Alma and Isabel - as stated by Kazimierz Dabrowski in his book, *Positive Disintegration*. Their personalities have developed primarily through dissatisfaction with and the fragmentation of their existing psychic structures.

Stimulated by a lack of harmony in the self and in adaptation to the strains of the external environment, the individual “disintegrates.” This is true in the cases of both the narrators. Depression and writer’s block are some indications of this disintegration and they point retrogression to a lower level of psychic performance. Lastly, reintegration takes place at a higher level and the personality progresses to a fresh level of psychic wellbeing with strength and vigor. According to Dabrowski, these new found integrations at “higher” levels seem to occur to people of superior acumen and distinct creative faculty. After the disintegration maladies and their signs, there takes place the reintegration at an advanced artistic level in creative geniuses. Alma is able to write her next work. Here, Alma the creator desires to opt her conflicts or some facets of her existence or personality especially her invisible bond with the nineteenth century Isabel to work on reflecting the inner and outer world in her work.

The most dreadful obstacle to triumph over writer’s block is the term “block.” Alma overcomes it successfully and is ready to face the world of commodification where people of the Third World are unfortunately looked on by the First World as mere commodities. People in the Third World countries are being used as guinea pigs by the First World countries. These mere products or commodities are signs of globalization in this consumerist world. The group of rebellious Dominican adolescents is like Isabel’s underprivileged orphans or the African slave girls whom Balmis bought from slave market to become his vaccine carriers. Emerson and Swan, the representatives of the First World countries, under the pretext of saving the world from AIDS have come to the Third World countries like the Dominican Republic with empty promises in order to test their drugs on these poor people. They are not testing this vaccine in the United States. Once the medicine is approved, the poor lots in the Third World countries will not be able to afford these medications. Just like the moor kid Tomas Meliton who was known as “negrito” amongst Isabel’s orphans was killed, the so-called adolescent Dominican terrorists are killed in the shoot-out.

Through the manipulation of language, the novelist Julia Alvarez is able to communicate two parallel stories of good and bad intentions. The two stories in this novel—Alma Huebner’s contemporary story and Isabel Sendales y Gómez’s nineteenth-century story—are narrated from strikingly different points of view. Alma’s is told in third person - she did this, she thought that. Isabel’s is told in first person - I did this, I thought that. The author has chosen these particular points of view for her two characters

The readers are able to decode the linguistic structures inherent in the novel in relation to the values and codes of the community in which the characters live. Through the verbal clues deposited by the author, the readers are able to identify the cultural and linguistic semiotics in the individual text. This fictional text is naturalized by making it to be the speeches of two credibly human narrators belonging to two different centuries. This study of culture of two different communities in two different centuries provides scope for cultural semiotics in *Saving the World*. The story highlights femininity, ambition, alienation, class discrimination, power politics and creativity through a series of parallels and binary oppositions.

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