

Three Functions of Dolls: *A Council of Dolls* through the Lens of Magical Realism

NILUFAR ELIBOYEVNA MUKHAMMEDOVA
Uzbek State University of World Languages, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates multiple functions of dolls in American writer Mona Susan Power's novel A Council of Dolls (2023), examining their roles as spiritual protectors, carriers of memory, and symbols of cultural survival. Using the concepts of magical realism as a theoretical basis, the paper shows how S.Power employs animated dolls to pass on Yanktonai Dakota cultural traditions through different generations of women. By blending supernatural elements into the daily lives of the characters, Susan Power questions Western views of time, historical objectivity, and the idea of objects as non-living. The dolls, Winona, Mae, and Ethel, act as spiritual guides for Cora, Lillian, and Sissy, providing both emotional support and narrative voice. These figures not only preserve individual and communal memories, but also influence how the characters deal with historical trauma and colonial violence. In conclusion, the novel presents a rich image of how Indigenous identity can be maintained and reinterpreted through symbolic, nonhuman figures rooted in traditional worldviews.

Keywords: Magical realism, Native American literature, dolls, functions, indigenous, culture, tribe, storytelling, traditions

INTRODUCTION

The XX century American literature witnessed the formation of magical realism that was originated in Latin American novels. In US modern literature it has become a narrative strategy for most of the Native American writers. Magical realism gave them an

opportunity to write about their history and thus inform new generation about their ancestors' culture. Magical realism has become a narrative tool for Native American writers in restoring their indigenous history, trauma and culture. In the novels of Latin American writers as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende, magical realism is used to bring back cultural memory and storytelling traditions of local people. While in native American writers' novels, magical realism takes a different function in which there is a modification of a narrative technique to enliven tribal identity, spiritual beliefs and oral traditions.

Critics like Wendy B. Faris and Amaryl Chanady define "magical realism as the seamless fusion of supernatural elements with everyday life, where the logic of the narrative remains intact". In *Ordinary Enchantments* (2004), Wendy Faris identifies key features of magical realism, emphasizing that "supernatural events are portrayed as part of ordinary life without explanation, traditional notions of time and history are disrupted, and marginalized perspectives are foregrounded" (Wendy 2004: 384). A. Chanady, in *Magical Realism and the Fantastic* (1985), similarly explores how this "blending of the mystical and the real allows authors to represent mythic truths alongside historical events, as seen in Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*" (Chanady 1985: 89). Such approaches create a narrative space where folk wisdom, spirituality, and history coexist. Further expanding on this idea, P. Gabrielle Foreman argues in her article 'Past-On Stories: History and Magical Real, Morrison and Allende on Call' that magical realism differs from the fantastic or surreal because it requires a bond between the individual and the traditions and beliefs of the community (Foreman 2002: 712). Isabel Allende echoes this idea by stating that magical realism emerges from the violent convergence of global cultures imposed upon indigenous traditions in South America (Foreman 2002: 721). Similarly, critic Marguerite Suarez-Murias contends that magical realism presupposes an element of faith, setting it apart from genres that negate tradition entirely (Suarez-Murias 1982: 158). In this context, Native American writers utilize magical realism not simply to enchant but to empower. Their narratives confront colonial legacies and resist cultural erasure by

reaffirming the sacredness of oral traditions and collective memory. As storytelling remains central to Native identity, the storyteller is seen not just as a narrator but as a bearer of counsel, whose tales shape the listeners' experiences. Yet, in modern times, the communicability of such experiences is diminishing, making the preservation of these traditions through literature even more vital.

American critic Gerald Vizenor introduces the concept of "survivance" in *Manifest Manners* (2008), describing it as a narrative mode that intertwines myth and reality to combat colonial erasure (Vizenor 2008: 105). Survivance resists passive representation and insists on the active presence of Indigenous identity. This idea resonates with the broader goals of Native literature, which, despite its comparatively recent emergence in written form, reflects the vast and reemerged traditions of Indigenous storytelling. Paula Gunn Allen stresses the importance of examining each author's tribal context to fully understand their work (Allen 1992: 89). As she notes, the variety within Native traditions is immense, and literary analysis must consider the cultural specificity each narrative draws upon. William Bevis further observes that, unlike Western literature, which often values journeys into the unknown, Native American narratives frequently revolve around the theme of return to the land, the people, and the tradition. This motif of return functions as a form of resistance, expressing a refusal to assimilate and a strong desire for cultural reintegration. These themes are also embodied in oral traditions where stories survive based on their relevance and resonance. Leslie Marmon Silko, who grew up in the Laguna Pueblo community, explains that "stories persist only if they serve a purpose—conveying strategies for survival and embodying community values. If a tale no longer resonates, it fades, demonstrating the pragmatic and evolving nature of oral storytelling" (Silko 1996: 58).

Building on these ideas, Susan Power continues the work of writers like Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich. In *A Council of Dolls* (2023), she integrates magical realism to explore the enduring power of Indigenous women and the spiritual resilience of her people. Susan Power feminizes literary conventions and

employs magical elements using spirits, visions, and sentient dolls to reframe Indigenous history as a living, breathing force within the political realm.

DISCUSSION

A Council of Dolls intricately weaves the history of the Standing Rock Sioux, specifically the Yanktonai Dakota, through a multigenerational lens. The novel revisits the traumas of Indian boarding schools and violent displacement, portraying how these events shaped Dakota women's identities. Central characters in the story are the dolls, Ethel, Mae and Winona, who act as spiritual protectors and transmitters of ancestral wisdom to protagonists Sissy, Lillian and Cora. For instance, Ethel whispers advice and comfort to young Sissy, and even intervenes to save her life during a terrifying moment with her mother. "Ethel is on alert – I can feel her straighten up with nerves. I could pinch myself for saying as much as I did. Mama might not like it. I'm not sure. I don't always know what will make her mad, and what will be just fine. Sometimes I expect her to toss a bomb and blow me up, though she ends up smiling. Other times I'll chatter some story and not realize until it's too late that she's gone really quiet. The kind of quiet where a fire is starting, and you don't yet smell the smoke. Ethel whispers that I should change the subject, so I do." (Power 2023: 45). Mae, in a moment of intense abuse at the Indian school, defends Lillian and Blanche from the nuns. Mae rescues young Lillian from the violent attack of the nuns who were her teachers. Lillian realizes the reason of having and keeping Mae with her: "I'm shaking so hard I can barely stand, and it's Mae who comes to my rescue. She can't seem to do anything to help Blanche but is determined to keep me safe. She raises her hand in the air and waves it at me" (Power 2023: 88). Another doll Winona, Cora's beaded and buckskin doll, continues to guide and protect her spiritually even after being burned by her captors, reflecting the enduring spiritual presence that magical realism affirms. Cora talks to Winona hoping she would help her: "As I'm falling asleep that night, I ask Winona what she thinks of the article and the little bit I was able to read before disgust

turned my stomach. Winona sounds like Ina and not a doll. She's experienced more than I have" (Power 2023: 108).

The interconnected narratives of the three women illustrates the Dakota beliefs on intergenerational knowledge. Susan Power shows how traditions and spiritual values adapt and survive, despite colonial attempts to erase them. Through the lived experiences of her characters, she explores themes of cultural survival, historical trauma, and spiritual continuity.

Susan Power's use of magical realism enables her to bridge the supernatural with the real. Spirits in the novel exist not as abstract memories but as active forces shaping the present, guiding characters, and embodying ancestral presence. For example, in one of Sissy's visions, she sees the ancestors performing ceremonies and hears them urging her to remember who she is, reinforcing the connection between past and present. This challenges Western notions of linear time and asserts an Indigenous worldview in which the past is ever-present. Moreover, Susan Power gives a voice to dolls who act not only as spiritual guardians but as narrators and responsible people who keep memory. These dolls, often regarded as passive childhood objects, are reimagined as dynamic agents of cultural survival. Their roles confirm Native storytelling traditions and reinforce the power of oral histories. Dolls become storytellers, witnesses, and protectors, who as important figures safeguard both personal and collective identities.

In *A Council of Dolls*, dolls serve three central functions:

- spiritual guardians,
- narrators of memory,
- agents of survivance.

In *A Council of Dolls*, Susan Power masterfully assigns dolls the role of spiritual guardians to perform the first function, giving them the roles of agents and ancestral wisdom by changing their physical form. These dolls are not mere objects but vital protectors and companions for the characters, especially during the hard moments in their lives and big changes. For example,

Ethel, Sissy's doll, acts as a source of emotional support and spiritual strength. "Ethel whispered calmness and sense when the world turned wild around her," Sissy recalls, emphasizing the doll's role in anchoring her in chaotic situations (Power 2023: 37). Similarly, Mae, Lillian's doll, defends her and her sister Blanche during an abusive episode at the Indian boarding school, an act that elevates Mae from a symbolic to an active force of protection. The narrator describes, "Mae's eyes glowed like embers, and the air around her shimmered. The nun backed away in fear" (Power 2023: 89). These scenes illustrate how the dolls channel spiritual energy and ancestral presence, embodying the Dakota belief that objects can carry sacred power. By portraying dolls as sentient guardians, Susan Power reclaims Indigenous spirituality and offers a narrative where spiritual resilience is inherited, nurtured and made manifest through protective ancestral figures.

Narrators of memory become the second function of the dolls in the novel in which the writer Susan Power intricately weaves the dolls into the narrative as vital conduits of memory, serving not only as companions but also as narrators, who preserve and transmit the lived experiences of the characters. These dolls embody the oral traditions of the Dakota people, ensuring that personal and collective histories are not lost due to time or trauma. For instance, the doll Mae, associated with Lillian, transcends her role as a mere plaything to become a vessel of remembrance. Even after being buried with another child, Mae's spirit returns to Lillian during a moment of despair, offering comfort and a tangible connection to her past. This supernatural return signifies the doll's role in safeguarding Lillian's memories and cultural identity. Similarly, Winona, Cora's doll, serves as a repository of ancestral knowledge. Even after being destroyed in a boarding school, Winona's presence persists, guiding Cora through visions and dreams. This enduring connection emphasizes the doll's function as a narrator of memory, bridging the gap between past and present. Through these narratives, Susan Power illustrates how the dolls act as custodians of memory, embodying the resilience of Indigenous traditions and the importance of storytelling in preserving cultural identity.

They are not passive objects but active participants in the characters' journeys, ensuring that their stories are remembered and honored.

In their third function, the dolls are portrayed as profound agents of survivance, a concept claimed by Gerald Vizenor to describe Indigenous narratives that embody both survival and resistance. These dolls transcend their roles as mere toys, becoming vessels of ancestral memory, cultural continuity and spiritual resilience for three generations of Yanktonai Dakota women. Cora's doll, Winona, exemplifies this role. Crafted from buckskin and beads, Winona is more than a cherished object. She embodies the spirit of a murdered ancestor and carries the trauma of a historical massacre. Even after being burned upon Cora's arrival at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, Winona's presence is kept, guiding Cora through visions and dreams. This persistence underscores the doll's function as a repository of cultural memory and a symbol of resistance against cultural erasure. Similarly, Lillian's doll, Mae, serves as a protector and confidante during her hard experiences at a boarding school. Mae's presence offers solace and strength, reinforcing Lillian's connection to her heritage by reminding her identity. The doll's return to Lillian, even after being given away, signifies the enduring nature of cultural bonds and the resilience of Indigenous identity. In the contemporary narrative, Sissy, who later adopts the name Jesse, reconnects with the dolls of her foremothers. This reunion symbolizes a reclamation of suppressed histories and a healing of intergenerational trauma. Through the dolls, Jesse accesses the wisdom and experiences of her ancestors, enabling her to confront and transcend the inherited pain.

Susan Power's portrayal of these dolls as sentient entities underscores their role as agents of survivance. They are not passive relics but active participants in the preservation and transmission of Indigenous culture and identity. By weaving these narratives, the writer affirms the enduring strength of Indigenous women and the vital importance of storytelling in cultural survival. They connect generations, preserve cultural knowledge, and challenge historical silencing. For example, Mae

not only guards Lillian in childhood, but continues to appear in dreams, offering direction in adulthood, while Winona's lingering presence guides Cora through trauma and cultural recovery. In doing so, Susan Power reclaims narrative space for Native voices, reinforcing Gerald Vizenor's notion of survivance by presenting Indigenous presence as resilient, adaptive and creatively defiant.

CONCLUSION

Susan Power's work exemplifies how magical realism in Native American literature serves not only as a stylistic choice but as a powerful tool of cultural affirmation and resistance. Through stories that blur the boundaries between myth and history, authors like Susan Power bring new life into traditions, asserting that Indigenous identities are not relics of the past, but dynamic forces shaping the future.

In *A Council of Dolls*, Mona Susan Power creates a powerful literary space where Indigenous history, memory, and spirituality are woven together through the symbolic and functional presence of dolls. By portraying dolls not simply as childhood toys but as protectors, storytellers, and spiritual beings, Susan Power reclaims and gives life to Yanktonai Dakota cultural traditions that have been threatened by colonial violence and assimilationist policies. Each doll, Winona, Mae and Ethel serves as a unique vessel of ancestral strength, guiding the protagonists through personal and collective trauma, and offering continuity in a world fractured by forced erasure. The use of magical realism allows Susan Power to blur the boundary between the mystical and the real, situating Dakota world and belief systems as valid and enduring frameworks for understanding identity and survival. Furthermore, the dolls' enduring presence, both in life and spirit, reflects Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance, emphasizing active cultural resistance and narrative empowerment. The narrative shows that survivance is not only a philosophical stance but also a lived experience passed down through generations, often in quiet, symbolic forms like a doll. Through this intricate narrative structure, Susan Power affirms that Indigenous identity

is neither static nor erased, rather, it is dynamic, resilient, and continuously redefined through relationships, memory, and storytelling. *A Council of Dolls* presents the strength of Indigenous women, the persistence of spiritual knowledge, and the transformative power of narrative to heal, resist, and survive. It enriches Native American literature by giving voice to objects that carry entire worlds of meaning.

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NILUFAR ELIBOYEVNA MUKHAMMEDOVA

PHD., ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR,

UZBEK STATE UNIVERSITY OF WORLD LANGUAGES,

TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN.

E-MAIL: <NILUFARMUHAMMEDOVA@YAHOO.COM>

