

# The Universal Symbolism of River Narratives in Modern Literature

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**Abstract**—This article analyzes the use of river narratives as a symbol in literature from various regions of the world. Through the examination of works by authors such as Manuel María Madiedo (Colombia), George Eliot (United Kingdom), and Zhang Chengzhi (China), this paper demonstrates the universal nature of river symbolism and how it reflects human experiences and social realities. The authors employ literary techniques such as foreshadowing, symbolism, and metaphor to convey multifaceted images of the region and its people, exploring larger societal issues such as the struggle for individual agency, national identity, and cultural ideals. Ultimately, this paper argues that river narratives have the potential to resonate with the collective consciousness, contributing to a broader dialogue between Colombian and world literature.

**Keywords**—cultural education, literary genres, literary history, society

## I. INTRODUCTION

The natural world has been a recurring theme in literature since time immemorial, and rivers have often been depicted as powerful and symbolic elements that reflect the human condition or provide commentary on society and culture. This is evident in Colombian literature, where many authors use river narratives to explore crucial themes such as identity and politics. However, modern subjectivity presents a unique perspective on these traditional narratives. A comparative study between traditional river narratives and modern subjects' perspectives can provide valuable insights into literary themes' evolution and relevance in contemporary society.

Rivers have been a popular subject in literature for centuries, serving as powerful symbols that reflect the human condition and society's values. The main objective of this article is to explore the possibilities of a dialogue between Colombian and world literature. The complexity and richness of river narratives are reflected in their diverse forms and contents, making their analytical exploration a challenging task. This article presents a comparative study of river narratives in the works of authors such as Manuel María Madiedo (Colombia), George Eliot (United Kingdom), and Zhang Chengzhi (China). Drawing on the perspectives of literary critics such as Lukács and Mukařovský, the article examines how river narratives reflect social reality and its contradictions and offer aesthetic proposals that resonate with the collective consciousness.

The formulation of narrative styles whose effectiveness lies in their artistic relevance to the socio-historical moment is one of the most analytical objectives of literary studies. Furthermore, Mukařovský's approach to the relevance of the aesthetic object to society aligns with the notion of the novel as a reflection of social reality and as a carrier of inherent

contradictions of that reality. According to Gebser in *The Ever-Present Origin* [1], the symbolism of water is inexhaustible and cannot be fully examined. Therefore, when analyzing river narratives, it is crucial to recognize their vast contents and forms and their relationship with other narratives that touch on contents or forms. The comparative study can offer insights into the evolution of river narratives and their significance in contemporary society, emphasizing their impact on cultural, social, and historical contexts. By examining river narratives from multiple authors within diverse cultural contexts, a more comprehensive understanding of their significance can emerge.

### A. Theoretical Framework

To get to understand the relationship between the narratives presented by these authors, it is necessary to examine the comments made in the essay *Erzählen oder Beschreiben?* [2] by Lukács, the relationship between narration and description in epic literature is addressed, and he considers the modern novel to be the epic form of society. According to Lukács, the novel reflects social reality and can capture the multiple dimensions of human life, including the inherent contradictions of that reality. In his view, the novel accounts for a unity of constitutive contradictions and proposes "a new awakening of the pathos of ancient art and aesthetics" [3] to shape the relationships of the individual with society.

In this context, Mukařovský's perspective on the relevance of the aesthetic object to society aligns with the notion of the novel as a reflection of social reality and as a carrier of inherent contradictions of that reality. For Mukařovský, the aesthetic object is a social product that reflects the historical and cultural conditions of the society in which it is produced, therefore, its study should include a reflection on its relationship with those conditions. According to Mukařovský, the "dynamism of extra-aesthetic values" in a work can generate a clear "contradiction between two valuations" [4] (Translation is mine). Likewise, the contradictions between these values can be of different types and intensities, but they never affect the unity of the work [4]. The Czech author also argues that the work relates to the collective consciousness, as it has in common the subjective states of consciousness that the work provokes in the members of the community. This "meaning" is sometimes called the "aesthetic object" [4]. Normally, the manifestation of this artistic entity appears on the literary scene through its form and is understood by critics in the value of that execution.

## II. THE RIVER NARRATIVE: AN AESTHETIC PROPOSAL

In the narrative of Mary Ann Evans (known by her pen name, George Eliot), a category based on the dynamic image

of rivers is suggested. This can be seen in the statement of Thale [5], who refers to the familiarity that Eliot's readers have with the theory of moral degeneration called "drift theory" and how this metaphor is related to a larger one, life as a river, which is a recurrent figure in the works of George Eliot. Additionally, in a continuing conversation that Larry Rubin has with Thale, the use of river imagery in Eliot's works is discussed, as can be seen in the titles of articles such as *River Imagery in Daniel Deronda* (1954) and *River Imagery as a Means of Foreshadowing in The Mill on the Floss* (1956).

In *Daniel Deronda*, a novel by Eliot, a key term that explores the psychological quality of the characters and the moral facets that adjust according to the circumstances is "the current", a social and historical pressure that pushes them to which resistance is possible but difficult. If the characters cannot resist it, they fall into a "drift" that can degenerate them or lead to their demise, although in some rare cases, it offers them a chance at redemption from the same force. This conceptual proposal is not exclusive to the stylistic manifestation in terms of form, and there are moments in the plot that effectively represent the figurative expression of what the character is experiencing.

In the author's other work, *The Mill on the Floss*, one of the main characters, Maggie, is caught in a flood on the Floss River with her suitor and adrift in the tension built up to that point. At that moment, she is unable to respond to a marriage proposal offered to her, which suddenly directs her fate in the absence of a decision. At another moment, it is due to a flood that Maggie loses her life. Taking these episodes, the article's author argues that there is a condition of foreshadowing in Eliot's work, whose narrative thread runs through the river as an inexorable force and as a representation of unstoppable time.

Regarding the questioning of the effect of Maggie's tragic death, which is a recurring point in discussions about the work, the author comments that there are suggestions of a possible "Deus Ex Machina"-style execution, a narrative technique in which an insoluble problem is abruptly and unconvincingly resolved by the sudden intervention of a character, object or circumstance that had not previously been introduced in the plot. However, the possibilities of a response in the novelistic or fictional line, outside of that type of execution, are argued using symbolic sequences that strongly suggest the riverine function of life and how it flows in irremediable and defined actions, very natural or wild depending on the situation [6].

In her works, George Eliot explores the psychological qualities of characters and their moral facets that adjust based on the current social and historical pressures they face. Using literary techniques such as foreshadowing and symbolism, Eliot presents a narrative that explores the idea of characters being swept along by an unstoppable force, whether it be the Floss River or the passage of time itself. This narrative serves as a metaphor for the human condition and highlights the importance of individual agency in shaping one's own destiny. The effect of this narrative style can provide a path in the reading of the other works relevant in this paper.

Now, the article is going to explore the story that takes place in Manuel María Madiedo's novel *La maldición* (The Curse) [7] from 1859, so it is possible to proceed with the

first dialogue: The story begins with the return of *Carlos* from Europe to the Republic of Nueva Granada (Today's Colombia). He had left the country due to a tragic episode that had affected him deeply. On his return, arrangements were made, so an old fisherman named Diego took the responsibility of looking after him. They both shared some experiences around the city of Mompós in an exuberant tropical Riverland. One day, they come across a group of "bogas", (boatmen that work in the river) and *Carlos* experiences their traditional way of life. Later, a smaller group goes to the "Stream of the other world" a place known for its supernatural and pagan creatures such as the "Mohán" (mythical, typically amphibian creature). *Carlos* climbs up a waterfall and finds a Hermit playing the harp. After the characters shared their sorrows and expressed their deep Christian convictions, it became evident that the old man was the father of *Carlos's* deceased girlfriend. This revelation ultimately led to *Carlos's* tragic suicide, as he jumped off the waterfall. As the reading progress, a hermeneutic exploration follows the details surrounding Maggie's fatal episode and *Carlos's* death with different interpretive paths that emerged. What function or how does the bloody leap from the waterfall fit into *La maldición*?

A recent study conducted by Hidalgo [8] at the National University of Colombia, under the guidance of Professor Iván Padilla, suggests that the novel reflects the author's position on national political changes, particularly about the activity of radicals and religion. Hidalgo argues that the novel aesthetically evaluates a sociocultural reality and that this evaluation is exemplified through the romantic attitude of *Carlos* and the *Hermit*, representing the loss and search for the Christian path, respectively. Therefore, *Carlos* and his death serve as a metaphor for the nation that, in its ignorance of its Christian base, perishes. This interpretation is based on Hidalgo's reading of an essay by Madiedo, which argues that the idea of independence was adopted and conceived in a deeply colonial ethos, leading to military movements that surpassed intellectual movements in social operation. This proposal is probably linked to the approach of researcher Iván Padilla. In his work, he identifies the protagonist characters of European Romantic literature that portray "the mal du siècle" and must embark on a search for God to overcome it. He considers that Isaacs, in the famous Colombian novel *María*, rejects this model by using a character, *Efraín*, who simply doesn't question his religiosity because it is not in danger. Amid the typical Colombian literary character that lives a social commitment that doesn't allow for portraits of the aforementioned mal du siècle, the character *Carlos* from *La maldición* appears as an exception [9].

Padilla evaluates this exception in how *Carlos* does configure the European Romantic character, but with a narrator who, with his distance, can weigh it. This function is possible thanks to the choice made by Madiedo's narrator. The potential of this distance is even more important. For the novel, a way of distancing is essential that allows for apprehending the clashes, the sick and European *Carlos* is evaluated to the extent that he travels through all the landscapes and is somehow affected by them. The narrator's axiology is not only evaluating the character but also the literary tradition itself by using commonplaces as tools for denunciation or positioning. This is fundamental in the idea

of the novel explained by Mukařovský because it provides an understanding from the author of the historical needs and how to address them.

That is, the suicide of *Carlos* is part of the tragic ending of the Romantic character from which the narrator takes some distance, and at the same time it is the predetermination of the curse of the nation. One that was in full construction and a crisis of historical conjuncture. In this way, both authors formulate the metaphorical condition that *Carlos* embodies as the apostate nation or that of the European Romantic character who suffers the fatal tragedy of the *mal du siècle*. In these positions, the idea of an outlet is latent, as if the fall through the waterfall that causes the character's death carries with it the weight of the "drift", whether it is the nation that moves away from its Catholic past or the human being overwhelmed by historical changes.

That position of the author reflexes on the crisis and worries about the nation it's commented on by Mi in the article *Poetics of Navigation: River Lyricism, Epic Consciousness, and Post-Mao Sublime* [10]. There she categorized the narrative of several Chinese authors and described a style that corresponds to the situation lived in the country at that time. It is interesting that some of the conditions she found, share some similarities with Madiedo's Novel. The river played a crucial role in the literature of China's post-Mao era of transformation. River imagery was used as a vehicle for negotiating tensions and ambivalences in the reconstruction of national identity in both works. In China, it served as a dynamic tool in articulating the social imagining, cultural ideals, and political unconscious and therefore the author identifies this dynamic use of the river as a "poetics of navigation" that was an overcharged lyrical impulse for creating an epic through the fantastic figuration of the river. And in the case of the Colombian novel, with the late proliferation of the press [11], the use of verisimilitude in the depiction of recognizable spaces and characters was also a means of controlling the construction of national identity, in an era of science and mapping missions that wanted to understand the land to eventually control it.

The use of the narrator is yet another main point for the analysis, according to Jiayan Mi, the reflexive consciousness in the Chinese author's novel was explored through a dialogical interplay between the irrational "you", the rational "he", and the real "I" in surveying the rivers. Both Madiedo's novel and the work of China's post-Mao authors, such as Zhang Chengzhi's *Rivers in the North* [12], demonstrate a shared concern for their respective nations amid historical changes and crises. They do so by experimenting with the narrative voice, also showing their position in literary tradition. In other words, they sought to understand the genre and determine how they could modify it in response to the historical conditions they observed.

In Madiedo's case, by avoiding the typical first person of the romantic hero and instead using an omniscient narrator, the author can create distance between the characters and their emotions. Madiedo's novel actively challenges the traditional romantic model by employing deliberate and thoughtful choices. It avoids using the homodiegetic narrator and instead utilizes racial types to question rather than establish fixed notions. The narrator's distance is essential to the novel, allowing for the apprehension of clashes and the

evaluation of the literary tradition itself, by using commonplaces as tools for denunciation or positioning.

In Zhang Chengzhi's case, the use of multiple narrators highlights the complex and diverse perspectives on history and identity in contemporary China and shows the new place of the ego that was recently studied by psychologists that also had an impact in other narratives such as *To the Lighthouse* [13] by Woolf. The protagonist's metamorphosis in Zhang Chengzhi's work occurred by overcoming the violent waves of the river. Crossing the river marked a mythological rite of passage, representing new beginnings and rebirth. The first crossing was physical, reflecting the protagonist's youth and blind passion for a Utopian revolution. The second was introspective, marking a kind of resurrection.

In comparison with *Carlos*, the idea of a passage is present but is tragically fatal, whereas the narrative voice can move forward with new perspectives, perhaps as a manifestation of transformation within that voice. The use of literary techniques and narrative voices in Madiedo's novel and Zhang Chengzhi's work demonstrate a shared concern for national identity in the face of historical changes and crises, as well as a desire to experiment with traditional storytelling methods. The work *La maldición* by Manuel María Madiedo is a literary exploration of social themes and political criticisms, using stereotypical figures of *costumbrismo* (sketch of manners) and elements of romanticism. Through narrative distance, Madiedo criticizes both the church and liberal policies, capturing the contradictions and tensions of Spanish society during the implementation of liberal policies that moved them away from Christianity.

Additionally, the work uses the description of various settings that make up the space in which the novel unfolds, particularly the flora and fauna of the Momposina depression and the urban and rural spaces that compose it. The use of commonplaces and rhetorical figures from the 19th century denounce the absurdities of the reality described in the novel and create dialogue, irony, and criticism. The novel also reflects the ideological polarization between liberals and conservatives at the time and the resistance that Enlightenment ideas encountered in the social and economic structure of the time. The exploration of the novel and its historical and cultural context allows for an understanding of the cultural and literary tensions of the century.

Madiedo constructs a multifaceted image of the region and its people, exploring the relationship between nature and cultural identity. In this passage, for example, "The deep cup in which the waters rested for a moment allowed one to see, in those places where the trembling vibration of their silver waves permitted, jaspered pebbles of white." [7], unfolds a peaceful metagoge that plays with sensory elements and dreamlike imagery to convey some aspects of mineral wealth. There are also descriptions that can be accompanied by mystery and seen as a "dwelling of spirits, where no man could approach without dying immediately or at least without remaining enchanted there for the rest of his life, because as he said, some Moján lived in that pool" [7] whose value in the established symbolic system of the image of the sun opens the door to duality and allows the entry of spaces that are opposite, such as the Hermit's Garden and the stream of the other world.

A topic of extensive development is the desolation of the

places. Pristine nature displays its essence as an encompassing object of space, accounting for native geography that responds to the methodological advances of scientific missions in the nation. Thus, phrases such as “beaches that the river leaves during the summer season...” [7], or “On the edge of the spring, the heron, the coyongo, the pink spoonbill, and the plover” [7], among other mentions of American fauna and flora, lay the foundations for the recognition of national territory. As was a common occurrence in economic publications that aimed to establish national institutions of commerce, regulation, and study, which were still in the early stages of development prior to independence. The absence of a protagonist narrator in the novel can configure an intention of litotes and a silhouette of that which is common, reflecting the awareness of the narrative scenario of his time and his experience in first-person rhetoric.

The work uses a structure that, according to Lukács, captures these contradictions and tensions through literary consciousness. Firstly, the description of nature in the narration serves to establish a national identity based on native geography and American fauna and flora, an idea that was recurrent in publications seeking to establish national institutions in the lead-up to independence. It also reflects on the othering vision that most literate people have had about the Magdalena River and highlights the duality of the citizen and the importance of considering those who do not reside in the city or tributary entities.

### III. CONCLUSION

The analysis of river narratives in the works of authors from different parts of the world reveals the universal nature of the river as a symbol that reflects human experiences and social realities. By exploring the works of Madiedo, Eliot, and Zhang Chengzhi, this article demonstrates how river narratives can be interpreted as metaphors for individual agency, national identity, and cultural ideals. The comparative study of these narratives highlights the importance of literary techniques such as symbolism, foreshadowing, and the narrator’s distance in constructing multifaceted images of the region and its people.

The article also demonstrates how river narratives can serve as a vehicle for negotiating tensions and ambivalences in the reconstruction of national identity. In both Madiedo’s novel and Zhang Chengzhi’s work, river imagery is used to explore the relationship between nature and cultural identity, as well as to navigate historical changes and crises. The authors experiment with different narrative voices and styles to convey their unique perspectives on their respective societies, and their shared concern for the future of their nations amid turbulent times.

The narratives of George Eliot’s works and Manuel María Madiedo’s novel *La maldición* can dialogue in several ways. Firstly, both authors use literary techniques such as foreshadowing, symbolism, and metaphor to explore the psychological qualities of their characters and the impact of social and historical pressures on their lives. In Eliot’s works,

the river serves as a metaphor for the unstoppable force of time and the importance of individual agency in shaping one’s own destiny. In *La maldición*, the tragic suicide of *Carlos* serves as a metaphor for the nation’s ignorance of its Christian base and its ultimate demise in the context of a nation that is struggling to define itself.

Additionally, both authors use their narratives to explore larger societal issues. Eliot’s works examine the effects of social and historical pressures on individuals and their struggle for agency, while Madiedo’s novel reflects on political changes and the loss of Christian values in the nation. Both authors use their characters and plots to comment on these larger societal issues and to encourage readers to reflect on their own lives and the world around them.

Furthermore, this analysis reveals that societies with certain characteristics and needs, such as those struggling with colonialism, violence, and the use of nature in a modern context, share a common ethos that is reflected in their use of water symbols. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue between Colombian and world literature, demonstrating the complexity and richness of river narratives and their potential to resonate with the collective consciousness.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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