

# Crusade for Identity: An Exploration of Space Among Gender, Diversity and Inequality in Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* and *Blanca and Roja*

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**Abstract**—The purpose of the research is to comprehend the highly polymorphic notion of identity in the works of Anna Marie McLemore, a Mexican American writer. A detailed inspection of his works indicates that the concept of ‘identity disintegration’ is a concern in virtually all of them. This research aims to demonstrate identity development as a process rather than a distinct result of the struggle. Identity development, as an ever-changing process, provides us with new avenues for investigating subjectivity. Using a close reading of the selected texts, this research demonstrates that identity disintegration is an ongoing process that can create new understandings and possibilities. Through these processes and subsequent learning to survive in postmodern society, individuals can create their subjective identities. This article uses *When the Moon Was Ours* and *Blanca and Roja* to relate young adult literature to magical realist canonical works, notably analysing how the texts use magical realism to examine trans bodies. The genre, magical realism is typically characterized by fluidity and intangibility, which explores gender and sexuality in the select texts, helping readers grapple with issues of identity and representation. Similarly, McLemore’s use of Latinx traditions allows young readers to engage in intersectional debates about magical realism, trans bodies and Latinx culture. Through the retelling, McLemore can present nuanced arguments about trans bodies and the Latinx culture that often rejects them which in turn inspires the young readers to explore with an open mind.

**Index Terms**—colourism, gender identity, trans normality, queer conflict, queer magical realism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Anna Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* and *Blanca and Roja* are retellings of a fairy tale. Using magical realism and dream-like sequences, the novels examine the importance of fate, sisterhood, and familial loyalty. Examining each sister's unique preferences and decisions allows for additional exploration of the themes of love, grief, and metamorphosis. *When the Moon Was Ours* and *Blanca and Roja* by Anna-Marie McLemore are intensely intimate examinations of life, love and family that highlight the difficulties of growing up and the need to be true to one's own. According to Gerineldo Márquez, being gay should be singled out and labelled as ‘not normal’. Magical realities help to change the labels and give them an identity, showing the world that they are no different from the others in this society. So, authors like McLemore use magical realism as a tool to expand and gain identity in this society. Lewis C. Seifert contends that magical realism will expand and gain more authors and works if it is more inclusive of LGBT themes. A coming-of-age novel with the feel of a fairy tale, Sam and Miels' story is heart-breaking and beautiful. It remains a testament to love's power and an ode to the inner strength of two remarkable people whose love will transcend time and adversity. With its sweeping scope and powerful story, *When the Moon Was Ours* is a timeless romantic fantasy with far-reaching implications. The story is both familiar and unique; the theme of a young person struggling to reconcile identity with society's expectations is timeless, yet this particular tale feels special in its ability to capture beauty in the midst of pain and its tender portrayal of a young love that is meant to be, but not necessarily in the way one might expect. *Blanca and Roja* is a queer, Latinx retelling of *Swan Lake* that combines *Snow White* and *Rose Red*. The plot depicts the effects of binary colourism and colourism on two Latina sisters. *Blanca and Roja*'s four voices are all made up, and none of them sound precisely like the author. The author was less honest about how these swan sisters reflect her own self. One of the most common comments the author received about this novel was that Page's switching pronouns provided a place for readers to contemplate their own gender identities. This study reveals, through a critical

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reading of both the texts that identity disintegration is an ongoing process that can lead to new understandings and possibilities. As a result of this process, individuals are better equipped to develop their subjective identities and thrive in a postmodern society.

## II. OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of the research is to find and explore the space between gender, diversity, and inequality from the major texts of Anna-Marie McLemore's *When the Moon Was Ours* (2016) and *Blanca and Roja* (2018). This article connects young adult (YA) literature to magical realist canonical texts, specifically discussing how these novels employ magical realism to analyses trans bodies. The magical realism genre is characterized by flexibility, intangibility, and hypothetical. This research provides an entry point to investigate gender and sexuality, assisting readers in grappling with concerns regarding identity and representation that may not be available in other novels that are also fluid and intangible. McLemore's use of Latinx traditions, on the other hand, provides readers with a more tangible and concrete bridge to explore their subjectivities, allowing them to recognize that postmodern fluidity can be reached by connecting their culture and traditions.

To acquire the study's aims, the study employed a qualitative method. A secondary materials analysis from university libraries and a focused search on online databases were carried out. The qualitative technique aided the study in meticulously analysing numerous parts of the novel's queer characters and fairy-tale notions.

## III. GENDER NONCONFORMITY: A GUIDE TO TRACE TRANSITION

Gender nonconformity holds that there is a right and wrong way to be a girl or a boy. Gender psychoanalytic theories highlight that children learn to identify with their parents. The term 'Gender Nonconformity' refers to people who don't conform with the gender norms that are expected of them. According to Daryl J. Bem (1996), children actively define gender and behave in ways that reflect their beliefs about gender roles. "Although there is little scientific evidence to support Freud's views, his theories spurred fresh dialogues about sexuality and gender, which his daughter Anna Freud continued in her study" (Ehrensaft, 2014, p. 32). Social learning theory stresses the incentives and penalties that children experience for acceptable and unacceptable sexual activities. In an interview, McLemore shares her winning experience and explains by saying "the ways in which these swan sisters hold parts of me". The author further adds that she was less open about:

what I had in common with Yearling. And the author was aware only in the dimmest, most distant way of what I had in common with Page. That realization: that a character who seemed so distant from me—in terms of her circumstances and her wants and desires—was, deep down in her heart, just like me? That was the biggest surprise. (McLemore, 2021)

While the characters' paths diverge in some ways, their underlying shared similarities are a testament to the real-life struggles of trans and gender nonconforming people. This works to normalize queerness and subvert the status quo of heteronormative and homophobic society. Therefore,

the peritextual of novels by authors who have a personal relationship with a transgender person offer information regarding those relationships that can validate and authenticate the novels' fictional transgender representation. In doing so, they imply the characters have been written through the lens of the authors' personal experiences with their loved ones. (Corbett, 2020).

It is important for kids to be exposed to stories that demonstrate the diversity of gender experiences so that they can understand how multifaceted gender identity is and appreciate the spectrum of identities that exist, "comparing and contrasting the characters' paths can provide a great window into transgender lives, demonstrating both the similarities that unite us and the differences that make each person unique" (Bem, 1996, p.325). By critically analysing the texts, young readers can gain a better understanding of how those outside of their experience interact with the world and build empathy for people in the LGBTQIA+ community. This is an important step in helping young people realize that gender is a much more complicated concept than what is presented in the media and mainstream society. Both Boyne's and Devine's peritexts utilize pseudo-anthropological jargon to frame the novel's transgender subject matter via the cisgender gaze, a concept used to allude to male gaze. Thomas (2019) investigates "how transgender and other nonbinary individuals are scrutinized for pleasure and consumption by cisgender individuals" (pp. 519-521). Through this process, the young readers get the understanding to recognize the value of respecting and understanding differences and strive towards creating an accepting environment. The article, *Engaging with Multicultural YA Literature in the Secondary Classroom: Critical Approaches for Critical Educators*, the researchers aim to provide young readers, "with an understanding of how those in the LGBTQIA+ community interact with the world" and to explore the ways in which their behaviours can have a positive impact on LGBTQIA+ lives. Research carried out among the school children made use of Anna-Marie McLemore's text "in their syllabus and assign the students a set of exercises and debates to give an understanding and tolerance towards the society" (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019). Ginsberg and Glenn want to educate young people about how gender identity and expression intersect with the LGBTQIA+ community and how this informs our understanding of gender. According to *PFLAG* (2007), families of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people may all go through the same phases of denial, anger, and sadness, as well as safety concerns and

misunderstanding. When it comes to gender nonconforming and transgender children and teens, the majority of parents indicate that their children did not come out, but rather came to them, especially in households with very young children who violate conventional conventions of gender, “parents describe a past in which their gender nonconforming kid just appears, frequently in stark contrast to their previous children, in my clinical interviews with parents and in accounts from other gender normative children” (Ehrensaft, 2011, pp. 28-30). These magical representations of the cisgender characters from the novels, in particular, help them to relate young readers’ personal experiences to the marginalization of characters. This helps the young readers to create a diplomatic meaning based on their own concepts of gender and sexuality. It is generally a juxtaposed meaning about trans people and persons of color identities. Young readers interact with deeper understandings of LGBTQ identities and the text itself, as they deal with elements of magical realism, brings fluidity and intangibility to their understanding.

#### IV. PROPOSITION TO THE SWAN

The foundation for McLemore's characters' quest for identification is provided by their ability to mix and break these fairy tale ideas. These fabulists capture the gray areas between black-and-white stereotypes embracing their culture and ancestry. Each generation of Blanca and Roja's family has a *del Cisne* girl claimed by the swans, who turn the selected sister into a swan while leaving the other human. Even though the sisters have an ideal relationship with no conflict between them, they do have the conflict of the curse and the depiction of the sisters as one dark and the other fair is a perfect presentation of how people assume color in this society and how they sort the characters as good and evil. In the article *Unwinding the Identity and Racial Saga in Maya Angelou's Gather Together in My Name*, the author mentions the discourse and identity of color. That black or the color dark is always inferior to white: “The Blacks and Whites lived in discrete areas. There were no normal social affairs or different possibilities where they could know one another. The Blacks have recounted accounts of racial brutality between the Blacks and the Whites hence the Blacks fear the whites” (Vijayakumar & Neyah, 2020, p.1333). After physically blending into the forest months earlier, friends Barclay and Page are reborn as humans and join the girls' lives to play unforeseen roles in their fate while distancing themselves from their former existence. It is very wild and stressful to contemplate the four teens aggravating to protect the boys from their families and save the females from the swans. The typically rich and vibrant prose of McLemore, the story incorporates the idea that transformation is never totally complete. McLemore introduces the notion that genuine transformation needs time and patience by allowing the characters to learn from and develops their experiences. The conflict between the consoling advantages of staying there and the frequently tragic cost of allowing for change is another key theme in the novel. The author uses the tautological criticism in her book by making both sisters accept their curse and turn into swans. In the beginning of the story, the sisters search for their own knight in shining armor to save them from their curse. Till the end they didn't realize that the only protector is in them, and it is their sisterhood. Blanca is a gay Latina teenager who believes she must be good as an atonement for being queer. Roja is a Latina girl who finds both grief and empowerment in the fact that the rest of the world perceives her to be the bad girl. Page is a transgender and non-binary and alternates between he/him and she/her and changes his pronouns throughout the book. This kind of conflict about gender is normal among the children. In general, teenagers fall in love with their opposite sex during the time of adolescence but for the teenagers who find it difficult to identify their own gender, it is crucial to identify their partner. In such cases, they are liberal to accept the changes and fall in love with the same sex partners. “This can be understood in terms of children no longer feeling they have to be the opposite sex to have and express the impulses they have” (Pickstone-Taylor, 2003). McLemore has beautifully brought the feeling of the young Page's understanding his/her gender and preferences. In an interview the author says “I'll be using she/her since that's what Blanca uses for her most of the time. Page has her own subplot based on a completely different fairy tale: *The Ugly Duckling*” (McLemore, 2021). The young readers of McLemore's earlier works will find plenty of romance and magical realism in this novel, but this one stands out for its exploration of the complexity of the self-identity and avoids the confusions of gender normality.

For too many generations, the *del Cisne* sisters were sacrificed for the swans to pick from, and they relished in taking one and leaving the other. The swan is a representation of the authors fear towards swan. This novel is also a close eye representation of McLemore's own childhood. She often brings up the character of a bear prince from another story *Snow White and Rose Red* is because of her childhood soft toy companion. Their frustration of the curse was a separate thing, yet amid their terror, their resolution was ignited. The curse of the swan in the novel is also a representation of the author's childhood memory of her first encounter of the swan. Despite the fluffy and all white appearance, the swans bite scared McLemore for her whole life. Even though the author's childhood trauma is depicted on the character of Blanca and Roja it is certain that Blanca and Roja cast a pleasant spell. The verge of starting with ‘Once Upon a Time’ McLemore weaves in and out of several first-person tales, a beautiful reimagining of *Snow White and Rose Red* with a lovely Latinx feel woven throughout and mesmerizes once more with a gloriously supple story at the intersections of identity, family, and history. This is a captivating story of sisterly love in a culture that was looking for sparks of sibling rivalry to flare into a blaze. In *Blanca and Roja*, McLemore reimagines the classic fairy tale of *Snow White and Rose Red* through a Latinx lens that encapsulates not only the beauty of sisterhood but also the complex and difficult moments that arise when familial love is tested as sisters Blanca and Roja battle against a powerful family legacy to decide the fate of their beloved home. Blanca and Roja's search for consolation in each other, obfuscating reality, and

the anxiety they were unable to overcome, overwhelmed me with a welter of emotions. The author's portrayal of Yearling as a golden lily is another form of self-representation. Yearling is also adjusting to his disability, something that McLemore has portrayed with so much attention and sincerity. This novel is about both romantic and platonic relationships between Page and Blanca, and Roja and Yearling. The love between them is soft enough to hold but not enough to hurt. But mostly, the way they were a testament that, in times of despair, they navigate the young readers a reason to reach for each other and hope that the edges of their hopelessness would dissolve. The way their relationships were presented reminded me that human connection is the only thing that can ever be truly reliable. Despite the seemingly bleak landscape that McLemore has created, love has become a powerful form of comfort in her stories. Many writers who made their lives beyond continents have projected in their writings that love conquers all. The central character Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* is one such example: "In spite of all her worries and longings, Ashima is passionate enough to understand Ashoke's mission and adjust herself to the present world of reality that demands explicit boldness and psychological transformation" (Vijayakumar & Banu, 2013). McLemore brings out all the wonderful elements of romance and cultural identity as one and the need of recoronation for a woman is more important than any other recognition

#### V. BUD BLOOMS TO BE A BOY OR A GIRL

*When the Moon Was Ours* by Anna-Marie McLemore is a romance that addresses LGBTQIA+ identities with subtlety and tenderness. This story, like *Cisneros Woman Hollering Creek*, depicts a variation of the Llorona myth that breaks the cycle of its normal tragedy. Miel's partial amnesia is the consequence of her near drowning while trying to recall her mother and her mother's true reason. Miel, the central protagonist, is also suspicious that her mother was trying to get rid of her own rose. She is blackmailed early on by a group of sisters who want to collect her flowers because they believe they have magical abilities. Morgan (2020) asserts that this "kind of novel will probably be attributed to magical realism rather than speculative fiction. Two transfigures appear in it, one of which benefits from a magical transformation, while the other is not yet an adult and has only carried out the transformation socially" (p. 105). Sam and Miel is the story of two people grappling with their own individual identities and trying to find common ground amidst the pressures of society. Sam, a young silent lad who hangs moons about town, and Miel, the girl who sprouts roses from her wrist, were never destined to be embraced by their society, and it is unavoidable that the two outcasts and best friends fall in love. Losing their virginity to one another may appear to be the natural next step in their years-long friendship, but it is not without issues, the least of which is Sam and Miel's attempt to realign themselves as loving partners.

The Bonner sisters, las gringas bonitos and alleged brujas, perceive Sam and Miel's new closeness and exploit it. They demand the petals of Miel's roses for love potions, and they threaten her with every secret she has about the history she left behind and her connection with Sam. Sam's personality is frequently portrayed as thoughtful and nurturing. The nurturer sees the world with compassionate eyes allows people to be people, with all their beauty and flaws. In the eyes of Sam, the flowers that frequently bloom from an enigmatic stem on Miel's wrist stand for her family's extensive and enigmatic history with magic. Sam's thoughtfulness and nurturing personality is often highlighted in the show as they are deeply intertwined with Miel's past. The novel concludes with Sam and Miel passionately making love again, but with Sam confidently revealing his entire body to Miel for the first time. This moment is particularly powerful as it symbolizes the shift in the relationship between Sam and Miel, with Miel allowing herself to fully accept and appreciate Sam's beauty and understand their connection on a deeper level. As the novel progresses, their relationship becomes more intimate, and their respect for each other grows.

This research specifies the importance of identity and inequality in the works of McLemore. These kinds of portrayal give a better understanding to the young readers about the changes and struggles during the adolescence. The author implies the importance of the use of the word transgender in her works and in interviews. Being a Latinx transgender the author uses the transgender characters as reference to the gender confused young teens. These teenagers fall back to learn who they are and understand the labels they were given by the society. So, this kind of representation of characters always help the gender confused teens to understand the difference and to encounter the mockery of the society for being 'not normal'.

The word 'transgender' is never used for Sam, and rightly so, because he never identifies as such, nor is the revelation of his sex assignment. Instead, his struggle to determine his path forward as a man, fact, is a replica of Miel's coping with trauma. Both the teens grapple with their identities both within and outside their relationship. Consequently, this story is more than a teenage love; it is about identity and the challenges of being part of a society that does not accept it. McLemore investigates into the special cultural custom of bacha posh, in which the protagonist participates before coming out as transgender. Sam's journey speaks to McLemore's willingness to challenge ideas of gender and sexuality that society is so quick to put into categories. By tackling these themes with such nuance, McLemore is able to portray a wide range of emotions as both Sam and Miels struggle with their personal truth while fighting against the pressure of external expectations.

According to Clark's and McLemore's notes, the peritextual materials of novels by authors who have "a personal relationship with a transgender person provides information about those relationships that can validate and authenticate the novels' fictional transgender representation by implying the characters were written through the lens of the authors'

personal experiences with their loved ones” (Corbett, 2020, p.13). As a result, these peritexts are intended to appeal to a transgender or questioning potential reader (or their guardians) looking for nuanced and sympathetic depictions of transgender identities. Gerineldo Márquez says, queerness is not just impossible; it’s also a cause of mockery that must be picked out and declared ‘not normal’. When male characters do not act out immaculate masculinity and heterosexuality, the narrative repeatedly draws unfavorable attention to them. The protagonists in each of these stories promote gender struggle as the most essential ideal that a teenager may strive towards. By pointing out these characters’ bi-nature behaviors, they get separated and perceived as outliers. Furthermore, heterosexuality is emphasized by how others perceive a young Colonel Aureliano Buenda as an adult while he stays a virgin: “everyone felt it weird that he was now a full-grown man and had not known a woman” (Márquez, 2018, p. 50).

It guarantees that queerness is regarded as nothing more than another form of heteronormativity. The author normalizes Sam and Meil’s connection as something that is just acceptable within the context of the novel. Although she tells us at the beginning that this is a work of fiction, she explains her personal connection to Miel and Sam’s story, in the end. The author grew up hearing La Llorona stories about the weeping woman who, legend has it, tried to drown her children by the river, and later learned about the bacha posh, an Afghan and Pakistani cultural practice. She also tells us about her marriage to a transgender male.

According to Seifert (2017), if magical realism is open to more gay subject matter, it will only develop and incorporate more writers and stories: “queer reading practices operate against the anticipated, the known, and the predictable—of gender, sexuality, and structures of dominance more broadly—exposing their unexpected, unfamiliar, and surprising aspects” (p. 16). As in her debut novel, *The Weight of Feathers* McLemore weaves these very real and physical difficulties which are infused with magical realism aspects, such as Miel’s roses, Sam’s moons, and the Bonner sisters’ witchery.

Ultimately, the novel gives Sam and Miel, a space to discover their own truths, allowing them to confront their fears and ultimately choose a future for themselves. Despite the many obstacles they face, Sam and Miel remain steadfast in their devotion to each other, proving that love can overcome anything. The protagonists of McLemore promote gender confusion and family trauma as the most essential ideal that a teenager may strive towards. These feminine behaviours of men get them separated from the family and society and drive them to be outliers. McLemore weaves queerness into every possible area of her narrative. At the same time, it is also illustrated that it is not necessary to have a queer identity in order to read a story queerly and use queerness to enrich one’s experience of it. In emphasizing machismo, McLemore conveys an important lesson; “that queer identities and masculine identities are not mutually exclusive” (Latham, 2010, p.338). Sam’s birth name and gender did not reflect who he had become in the end of the novel. It is his individuality of recognising himself was the end of his crusade for identity.

## VI. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The topic chosen for the study has provided ample queer aspects and concepts within the narrative of a fairy tale. However certain limitations have been faced in the process of research as there are fewer theories to support this kind of novel. None are specific enough theory to pinpoint the exact concept of the novels which come under queer studies and magical realism. The limitations of the study can be marked as the inability to incorporate the vast knowledge existing on the topic. A specific study under the light of a suitable theory would be more beneficial for the study.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Anna-Marie McLemore’s works provide readers with a unique perspective on gender and sexuality, allowing young readers to recognize their own unique gender identity and how they fit in a world that is still struggling to understand. This research has demonstrated to facilitate a safe space in which young readers can critically analyse texts and gain a greater understanding of the intersection between sexuality and gender identity. This research has promoted inclusivity, understanding, and respect towards members of the LGBTQIA+ community by helping young readers gain an awareness for their experiences and viewpoints. This research also helps the young queer readers to gain a deeper understanding for the intricacies related to gender and sexuality and to cultivate an attitude of acceptance and understanding towards people of all genders and sexual orientations. These fairy tales make the readers to effortlessly understand the gendered community as they demonstrate the resilience and strength of LGBTQIA+ individuals in difficult circumstances. The study concentrates on the acceptance of gendered community and their identity in society. It also scrutinises the complexity and danger of strict gender roles through the protagonists of the selected texts. Sam and Miel in *When the Moon Was Ours* overcome the fear of romance and get their space in the society by bravely facing the outer world. For Sam, his assigned name and gender at birth does not match his present identity. Miel falls in love with Sam, accepting what he has become now. Similarly, *Blanca and Roja* is about the acceptance of life in its way. Blanca, who has fairer skin and yellow hair, is expected to survive the curse, and Roja, who is dark skinned with red hair, believes that she’s bound for an inevitable fate. But this thrilling element provides a chance for McLemore to delve deep into themes of love, acceptance and colorism. The terror of changing bodies and the fear of isolation are terrible for both the girls. The del Cisne sisters love one another so much that they vow to save the other, no matter what it costs. They might express confusion or have questions, but ultimately, try to make it a point to accept their identity as they are

and understand that their feelings about gender should not be dismissed. In conclusion, these stories and readings can help LGBTQIA+ people of all ages to accept themselves and others to avoid diversity and inequality. This article can be used for further studies related to cisgender understanding, Queer-Magical Realism, Fairyism, Queer Fabulism and other related research that comes under Queer Studies and Magical realism. Furthermore, the research fosters a sense of community among those who read this study, enabling them to share their own experiences and insights with one another.

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