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The Writer's Double: Authorial Identity in Julia Alvarez's *Saving the World*

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Abstract

Julia Alvarez's *Saving the World* (2006) tells two connected stories: that of Alma Huebner, a modern novelist facing personal doubts and creative block, and Isabel Sendales y Gómez, a nineteenth-century woman who travelled across the Atlantic with orphaned children carrying the smallpox vaccine. By bringing together a present-day writer and a historical caregiver, Alvarez creates a doubling of characters that raises questions about what it means to be an author and what responsibilities come with telling another's story. Alma's uncertainty about her voice is against Isabel's determination and self-sacrifice. Their interaction allows Alvarez to explore the uneasy balance between artistic ambition and ethical obligation, between the urge to tell stories and the danger of speaking for others. In this way, the "writer's double" shows that authorial identity is not fixed but is shaped through negotiation among history, imagination, and responsibility. The writer's double becomes a way of dramatizing authorial identity, not as a singular essence but as a negotiation between history, imagination, and responsibility. Using insights from Foucault's idea of the author function, Patricia Waugh's theory of metafiction, and Linda Hutcheon's work on historiographic metafiction, this study argues that *Saving the World* offers an important rethinking of the writer's role in postcolonial and transnational contexts. Alvarez presents authorship as fragile, dialogic, and ethically charged, acknowledging limits while seeking to "save" through narrative.

Keywords

Authorial Doubles, Narrative Ethics, Metafiction, Latina Writing, Historical Fiction, Author Function.

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Julia Alvarez's *Saving the World* is one of her most self-conscious novels, bringing into the centre of the narrative the figure of a novelist who cannot separate her life from her art. Alma Huebner, a Dominican American and long-established in her career, enters the story as a writer who suddenly finds herself without direction. She hesitates to continue her work, feels detached from her subject matter, and wonders about the purpose of writing itself. Parallel to Alma's present-day life runs the historical account of Isabel Sendales y Gómez, a modest woman who assumes caretaker for twenty-two orphan boys chosen to transport the smallpox vaccine across the Atlantic during the Balmis Expedition. These two women, separated by centuries and circumstances, are drawn together within the novel's structure so that each reflects the dilemmas and strengths of the other.

Alma functions as more than a character; she represents the interior space of the writer at work. Her doubts, hesitations, and revisions are built into the very texture of the story, so that the act of writing becomes part of the narrative itself. At one point, she reflects, "Somebody's got to go to the edge and look and come back and tell about it" (Alvarez 73). Alma recognises the burden of narration but feels unable to fulfil it fully. She wants to tell stories that matter, but struggles with the suspicion that her privileged life prevents her from speaking with authenticity.

Isabel's story is very different from Alma's. Alma tries to express herself through writing, but Isabel shows her strength through action. She agrees to cross the Atlantic with a group of orphaned children and takes full responsibility for their safety and the mission. Speaking in her own voice, Isabel sounds clear and strong. She does not dwell on vague worries but shows the real weight of her choices. "They were my charges, and I would see them safely across the waters," she declares (Alvarez 132). Her words reflect the kind of responsibility a writer holds—but in her case, it is shown through care and protection, both physical and emotional.

Alma and Isabel's stories mirror each other, creating a doubling effect. Alma tries to picture Isabel's life, but Isabel also becomes a standard by which Alma judges herself. Alma, the writer, sees in Isabel—a real-life caregiver—a sense of moral certainty that she struggles to find. This doubling makes the line between author and character less clear, as Alma's voice and perspective quietly influence Isabel's chapters, shaping how her story unfolds. Michel Foucault's idea of the "author function" helps explain this relationship: authorship is not a natural starting point but a position shaped by language and culture (Foucault 107). In the novel, Alma shows this clearly because she is both a character in the story and the one shaping it, both the subject being described and the voice doing the describing. Alvarez uses this doubling not to glorify the writer but to show how complex and uncertain the role of the author can be. The doubling emphasises this tension, showing that the author's identity is never autonomous but forged in dialogue with others, history, and the demands of responsibility.

Alvarez carefully designs Alma and Isabel's relationship as more than parallel stories. Placing the modern writer alongside the historical figure allows Alvarez to explore what it means to claim the role of an author in a world shaped by silence, suffering, and inequality. Alma questions whether she should attempt to tell Isabel's story at one key point. She worries that by doing so, she may be "appropriating another woman's story" (Alvarez 95), taking a voice that does not truly belong to her. This hesitation is central to the novel. The writer is never free to invent; she is always caught in questions of authority and responsibility.

Here, Alvarez touches on a long debate in literary and cultural theory about whether writers, especially from privileged positions, can speak for others. GayatriSpivak famously asked, "Can the subaltern speak?" arguing that the voices of marginalised people are often overwritten by those who claim to represent them. Alma's worry shows this exact conflict. She hopes to bring Isabel's forgotten role back into memory. Nevertheless, she is afraid that by turning Isabel into a character shaped by her own imagination, she might end up silencing her once more. The doubling, therefore, exposes a paradox: the only way Isabel's story can be told is through Alma, yet Alma's authorship risks silencing the subject she wants to honour.

This paradox connects to what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," where the boundaries between fact and fiction are deliberately unsettled. In *Saving the World*, Isabel's story is not told as a clear, factual history. Instead, it is shown through Alma's retelling, which has missing pieces, uncertainties, and personal interruptions. Sometimes, the book even points out what Alma does not know. For instance, when she thinks about how Isabel felt about the children, she says, "the archives are silent, and I must imagine" (Alvarez 141). The doubling thus dramatises how history and fiction intertwine, and how the act of narration must constantly wrestle with absence.

Alma's creative struggles also remind readers that the authorial identity is unstable. Michel Foucault says that an author is not just someone who creates meaning. Instead, the author is shaped by how society talks about things and decides who has power and responsibility. In the novel, Alma represents this idea. She not only shares Isabel's story but has also been influenced by her time, place, and culture. As a Dominican American woman, she is aware of being caught between worlds—between the privilege of writing in English for a U.S. audience and her responsibility toward her Dominican heritage. Her doubling with Isabel allows Alvarez to bring these tensions to the surface, showing how the writer's identity is always marked by difference and conflict.

Patricia Waugh says that metafiction draws attention to the act of writing itself, showing that stories are made, not just told. *Saving the World* does this through Alma. Readers are repeatedly reminded that Isabel's story is being created, changed, and imagined by Alma. This breaks the idea that the narrator is entirely in control. Alma is not a perfect storyteller—she makes mistakes, doubts herself, and changes her mind. By showing both Alma and Isabel, the novel makes us see writing not as something powerful and complete, but as a delicate and flawed way to try to speak for the past.

This metafictional layering not only challenges narrative authority but also deepens the emotional resonance of the novel's dual structure. The emotional heart of the doubling lies in the contrast between Alma's indecision and Isabel's certainty. Isabel accepts her duty to the orphans without hesitation: "I could not leave them, for they had no one else" (Alvarez 134). Her clarity makes Alma's uncertainty appear more painful. Yet Alvarez does not present Isabel as a simple heroine. She, too, experiences fear, loneliness, and doubt, but she continues her mission despite them. Alma, in turn, begins to see that writing, like Isabel's care, requires commitment even in the face of uncertainty. The double relationship allows Alma to grow by reflecting on Isabel's courage and revealing that writing can be an act of care.

Alvarez often uses historical fiction to bring overlooked women's stories to light. Silvio Torres-Saillant notes that her writing regularly "revisits the Dominican past to inscribe female agency into the record" (214). *Saving the World* continues this effort but adds complexity through its metafictional structure. Rather than portraying Isabel as a straightforward heroine, Alvarez tells her story through Alma, whose struggle to write reveals how such recoveries are never direct—they are shaped by interpretation and raise ethical questions.

By pairing Alma and Isabel as narrative doubles, Alvarez explores the tension between writing and real-world action. Alma struggles with the idea that her literary work falls short compared to Isabel's tangible sacrifices. Through this contrast, the novel questions whether storytelling alone can honour or match the impact of lived heroism. "What is a book beside a life?" she asks herself (Alvarez 167). However, Alvarez resists a hierarchy that places action above writing. Through the novel's very form, she suggests that writing too can be a responsibility. Even with all its difficulties, narrating Isabel's story becomes a way of honouring lives that would otherwise remain forgotten. The doubling makes this point powerfully: Isabel saves lives through her care, Alma tries to save the world through her words, and Alvarez frames both as necessary forms of labour.

In this way, *Saving the World* connects deeply with Alvarez's broader body of work, which often explores how storytelling shapes identity and community. However, this novel turns the lens inward more directly, dramatising the writer's own crisis of identity. The double figure allows Alvarez to stage an internal debate about her own role as a writer who works between cultures and across histories. The novel, therefore, contributes not only to the tradition of Latina writing but also to global conversations about the ethics of narration, the responsibilities of the writer, and the relationship between literature and history.

The bond between Alma and Isabel in *Saving the World* also brings forward the themes of care and moral responsibility. Isabel undertakes the dangerous journey across the Atlantic with twenty-two orphans, a role defined less by obligation to authority than by her sense of compassion. Isabel's decisions reflect what Carol Gilligan calls a relational approach to moral reasoning—one that values care, responsibility, and human connection over rigid rules (Gilligan 73). She does not act out of duty to abstract principles, but because she sees how much the children rely on her. Alvarez presents this ethic of care not as a weakness, but as a

powerful moral stance. Isabel's strength lies in her ability to centre others' needs in her choices, making compassion the foundation of her authority.

Alma's struggle as a writer can also be read through this lens. She recognises that writing is not only about artistic self-expression but also about responsibility toward others. NelNoddings defines caring as a relation in which the "one-caring" responds to the needs of the "cared-for" (25). Alma hesitates to finish her novel because she worries about failing in this responsibility to Isabel's memory. The doubling of Isabel and Alma demonstrates two modes of care: one enacted through physical guardianship, the other through narrative. Thus, Alvarez redefines authorship as a form of caregiving, where the writer assumes responsibility for voices that history has neglected.

Furthermore, *Saving the World* situates Alma's authorial identity within Latina feminist writing traditions as survival. Gloria Anzaldúa describes writing as "making sense of the chaos" of living on cultural and linguistic borders (169). Alma embodies this border condition. As a Dominican American novelist, she writes in English while haunted by Spanish and addresses a U.S. audience while carrying Dominican histories within her. The doubling of Alma and Isabel allows Alvarez to show how Latina authorship is always hybrid, shaped by multiple languages, geographies, and responsibilities. Cherríe Moraga has described Latina writing as "the site where theory and flesh converge" (24). Alma's writing crisis exemplifies this convergence: her theoretical concerns about authorship are inseparable from her embodied experience as a woman, an immigrant, and a writer.

Through these feminist and memory-centred frameworks, the doubling in *Saving the World* reveals authorship as an act of care, witnessing, and survival. Therefore, the writer's double reflects Alvarez's self and a figure through which broader traditions of feminist ethics and Latina cultural survival are articulated.The doubling of Alma and Isabel in *Saving the World* highlights the fragility and responsibility of authorship. Alma continually questions whether she has the right to tell Isabel's story, worried she might misrepresent another woman's life. Alvarez treats this uncertainty not as a flaw, but as a key part of writing across borders, where storytelling involves vulnerability and doubt. While Isabel's care for the orphan boys shows moral action through compassion, Alma's cautious writing reflects a different kind of responsibility—one focused on preserving memory with care and humility. Isabel saves lives directly; Alma tries to save Isabel's life in the narrative. Together, their different but complementary forms of saving reveal that the writer's identity is shaped by imagination and responsibility.

By the novel's end, Alvarez resists presenting authorship as control or mastery. Instead, she portrays it as an ethical practice. Alma knows she cannot fully capture Isabel's life, but she still chooses to tell her story as best she can. This acceptance reflects Alvarez's broader vision of authorship—not as a position of authority, but as one grounded in humility, empathy, and a deep commitment to honouring silenced voices.

Julia Alvarez's *Saving the World* examines the challenges of authorial identity by pairing Alma Huebner with Isabel Sendales y Gómez. Alma reflects the writer's struggle with doubt, uncertainty, and the ethical risks of telling someone else's story. In contrast, Isabel stands for moral conviction and a deep commitment to care. By placing these two figures side by side, Alvarez highlights the authorship's power and limitations. Alvarez refuses to idealise the writer as a sovereign figure of mastery. Instead, she highlights authorship as a practice rooted in responsibility and ethical imagination. The novel demonstrates that to be an author in a transnational world is to live with doubleness—between languages, histories, and

responsibilities. Alma's story acknowledges that writing cannot fully recover the past but can still honour it through testimony, care, and imagination. The writer's double thus becomes Alvarez's way of reimagining what it means to be an author: not the single voice of authority, but a voice doubled by humility and ethical engagement.

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