



## Patterns of Reticence and Counter Affirmation in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

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### Abstract

Chile is a country where patriarchy has dominated every aspect of life, from relationships, gender roles to the use of language and also, the balance of power between the two sexes. As a result, when access to power has been revoked, women have resorted to silence. However, silence is often the initiation of women struggle for social change and later becomes a vehicle of self-expression. Isabel Allende in her debut novel, *The House of the Spirits*, gives voice to the silenced marginalized subjects (women) of the patriarchal society of her country. She highlights the various social inequalities and the political instabilities of her country Chile and in this process brings forth fresh disposition to historical facts, as history is being told from Alba's viewpoint, one of the major narrators of the novel. The paper attempts to analyse by an integrated feminist approach, the emancipation of the ignored voices in the novel and how Allende abridges women's silence to empowerment by mingling the real and the magical.

**Keywords:** violence, silence, gender roles, assertion and women empowerment

### Introduction

Catherine Stimpson in the introduction of the book *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship* has expressed that, "women, if choked, have still spoken. For women, if on the borders of cultures, have still smuggled messages past border sentries. Their sentences begin in resistance" (2). Although, women have undergone a long tradition of silence and marginalization, yet, they have spoken both of silence and through silence.

*The House of the Spirits* is a multigenerational family saga set in the framework of 20th century Chilean social bigotry and political jeopardy. Since its publication, it proved a pronounced endowment to the feminist literary initiation of Latin America in the 1980s by authorizing the formerly devoid female narrative of its literature. The novel connects the history of Chile with the help of the Del Velle family and its significant female lineage for a period of about six decades from 1920s to 1970s. The novel, therefore, imparts a voice to the marginalized gendered subjects, whose recognition has been inhibited by the social, cultural and political forces that dominate their lives.

In the present paper, we will study by an integrated feminist approach, how Allende uses popular forms such as magical realism and a female narrative to empower the ignored marginalized voices of her country Chile. In doing so, she highlights the various forms of injustice, inequalities, violence and discrimination prevalent in Chilean society. Furthermore, the female narrative brings to the front new perspectives of Chilean history and focuses on the significance of reconstituting family histories. Therefore, we will read *The House of the Spirits* by applying the signifier of gender and as example of *Escriture Feminine*, as a result sanction its presence in the literature of Latin America.

Helene Cixous introduced the concept of *écriture Feminine* in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa". Allende in *The House*

*of the Spirits* constructs a foundation of women empowerment and establishes a female narrative that could be read and heard as an independent entity, thereby occupying an unprecedented area of the Latin American literature. An important means employed by Allende to strengthen this narrative is through inculcating her own experiences and her own "self" in the novel; using the protagonist Alba as her mouthpiece. Thus, by doing so Allende resorts to what Cixous states in "The Laugh of the Medusa" that, "Women must write her-self...women must put herself into the text— as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (Leitch 2039). Further, the novel's characteristics of a semi-autobiography recounts to what Leitch says Cixous as "everything about writing that can neither be subsumed into an idea nor made to correspond exactly to empirical reality" (2036). Lagos stresses that Allende's writings develop "a world from the perspective of a insider who positions herself as an outside, combined with a self-assuredness that expose women's strength and an awareness of the disadvantages women face in Latin America" (112).

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* observes women as the "Other" as she examines their role in the society, and she comments that "one is not born, but becomes a woman" (265). Therefore, women is seen as an object and as something that can be silenced and marginalized as per convenience. Similarly, Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* comments that, "woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end" (33). She states further that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (25). Also, for Nancy Chodorow, while masculine identity is "achieved", but the feminine identity is "ascribed" and the repercussion of which effects the way a woman perceives herself in the society.

In Latin America, the two concepts: machismo and marianismo are two model of behavior for men and women respectively. Jo Fisher in her book *Out of Shadows: Women, Resistance and Politics in South America* define machismo as “a system of gender relations which exaggerates the differences between men and women according to their so called ‘natural’ qualities and determines what is acceptable behavior from each” (25). Whereas, machismo describes men as dominant, authoritative, superior; marianismo perceives women as humble, docile and compliant. These concept even (space add). These concepts relate to the presence of Michel Foucault’s concept of the relation between power, sex and hierarchy. Octavia Paz claims in the *The Labyrinth of solitude* that “a world made in man’s image, women is only a reflection of masculine will and desire” (35).

These two concepts define the gender roles prominent in Latin American society. They further, surface and resurface in the novel, in the views that men carry about women and in the roles that society ascribes to them. Women are seen as inferior to men, not allowed to have any kind of ambition in life and the only duties they have to play out is that of a mother and perform their household chores. As the novel begins, Rosa is indulged in embroidery of a tablecloth and while doing so, she lets her imagination take over and starts carving dogs, cats and butterflies. However, all this worries her father, who, “felt that it was time for her daughter to shake off her lethargy, stand firmly in reality, and learn domestic skills that would prepare her for marriage” (6).

Later, in the novel, Blanca’s father didn’t interfere in her education unlike that of her brothers because, “He believed that her destiny was marriage and a brilliant life in society, where the ability to converse with dead, if kept on a frivolous level, could be an asset. He maintained that magic, like cooking and religion, was a particular feminine affair...” (136). Blanca started making creches, in which like her aunt Rosa’s tablecloth started adding animal imagery. Like Severo Del velle, even after half a century later Esteban’s reaction didn’t alter. “Esteban Trueba Concluded that her mania for clay for fine as a form of amusement for a proper young lady, but that if it became a business, the name of Trueba would be brought down to the level of those merchants who sold nails in the hardware stores and fried fish in the market” (174).

Helene Cixous proclaims that women have been defined as non- beings, as they are described in terms of lack, chaos, negativity, irrationally, darkness etc. Susan Gubar in her essay “The Blank Page and Issues of Female Creativity” states that “women has been defined symbolically in the patriarchy as a *tabula rasa*, a lack, a negation, an absence”(305-306).

Any work outside the house was seen as monstrous and in the words of Chesney- Lind, “Symbolic attempts (are made) to keep women subordinate to men by threatening those who aspire for equality with the images of the witch, the bitch and the whore” (qtd in Simpson 610). Early, in the novel, Nivea Del Velle fights for the rights of women. However, the patriarchal society is unkind in their attitude towards her. Esteban remarks, “That woman is sick in the head” (67). He declares, “It would go against nature. If women don’t know that two and two are four, how are they going to be able to handle a scalpel? Their duty is motherhood and the home”

(67). Nicholas beloved Amanda’s job as a newspaper reporter was in the words of Esteban Trueba, “A crooked profession” (220). He also considered her as a kind of a bad influence on his son. “He believed that her long hair, heavily made-up eyes, and her tendency to kick her shoes off and sit cross- legged on the floor like an aborigine was mannish behaviour” (220). Later, when he finds her own wife giving speeches of women empowerment, his rage is beyond control and “he shouted like a madman, pacing up and down the living room and slamming his fist against the furniture, arguing that if Clara intended to follow in her mother’s footsteps she was going to come face to face with a real man, who would pull her pants down and give her a good spanking so she’d get it out of her damned head to go around haranguing people” (106).

Maternal care, care giving are seen as natural qualities of women. Ferula, Esteban’s sister had the same character like her brother, “But life and the fact that she was a woman had forced her to overcome it and to calm down on the bit” (42). Their mother suffered from arthritis, and for her Ferula,” had accepted the role of her mother’s nurse” (42), not out of choice but for the reason that being a woman and a daughter it was expected out of her. Allende remarks, “Without anything being said openly, the fact remained that the daughter had sacrificed her life to care for her mother, and that she had become a spinster for that reason” (42).

“She seemed so perfect that word had spread that she was a saint. She was cited as an example because of the devotion that she lavished on Dona Ester...”(42). However, the reality of the situation was that Ferula was jealous of her brother’s freedom. For her, “His freedom to come and go stung her like a reproach, like an injustice.”(44). “It bothered her to have to stay locked up within these walls, bored, tired and unhappy while her brother had no taste of such obligations” (44).

Further, a son was preferred than a daughter. A daughter’s birth was a moment of sadness for the entire family. If a daughter had to be born, she should be born with a beauty to boost for. When Clara was pregnant, “Esteban wanted a son who would bear his name and pass his family name on down the generations” (100). Blanca was born a little uglier and with more hair than usual children, “Esteban jumped when he saw her, convinced that destiny was playing a cruel joke on him and that instead of the legitimate Trueba...he had sired a monster, and a female one to boot” (101). Later, in the novel, Esteban’s son Jamie wants to adopt her mother’s foster name and when he declares this news to his father, Esteban is enraged and he remarks “I married so I would have legitimate sons to bear my name, not bastards with their mother’s!” (228).

The patriarchal double standards regarding women can be seen Esteban’s words, when he remarks, “In my generations we used to distinguish between decent women and all the rest, and we also divided up the decent ones into our own (wives, daughters and mothers) and others” (22). Later, when he visits the prostitute Transito Soto and satisfies his sexual needs, he says, “I felt I was twenty again, and happy to be holding in my arms this bold, swarthy woman who didn’t fall apart when you got on top of her, a strong mare you could ride on without giving it a second thought, who didn’t make your hands feel heavy, your voice hard, your feet gigantic, or your beard too scratchy, but someone like yourself...”(118).

Patriarchy societies adopts certain means of marginalisation which condition women to maintain silence, such as denial of privileges as civil rights, legal rights such as right to vote etc. Women have been positioned on the margins of culture, which in turn lead them to silence and invisibility. Thomson J. Bruneau in his essay titled "Communicative Silences: Forms and Functions" describe silence, as "a concept and a process of mind which is imposed by each mind on itself and on the mind of others...The imposition appears necessary to mind, speech and especially sanity" (17). Janis P. Stout in his book *Strategies of Reticence* argues about certain ways of indirectly conditioning women to maintain silence. He states that such is done by "undervaluing women's voices in decision-making situations, praising soft-spokenness and casting women as 'ladylike' figures, lacking authority or nationality" (vii-viii). All this is represented in the gender roles that women are expected to play, examples of which in the novel have been stated above.

One of the most varied methods of subjecting women to silence adopted by the patriarchal society is violence in all its forms that is inflicted on the mind, body and presence of the women. The novel is explicit with examples of violence that is inflicted on women. Esteban Trueba employs violence as a measure to silence the courageous women that he is surrounded with and to portray his dominance. The most cruel examples violence committed by Esteban is the rape of the various peasant women, who, are also victims of violence inflicted on them by their husbands. Their history of victimisation is apparent in their comment to Clara about their views regarding the condition of women. They remark, "Since when has a man not beaten his wife? If he doesn't beat her, it's either because he doesn't love her or because he isn't a real man...Since when has women ever done the same things as a man? Besides, she was born with a wound between her legs and without balls, right, Señora Clara?" (106). Allende's description of the peasant girl Pancha Garcia's rape exceed to all limits of violence. She writes, "Esteban did not remove his clothes. He attacked her savagely, untrusting himself into her without preamble, with unnecessary brutality. He realised too late, from the blood spattered on her dress, that the young girl was a virgin, but neither Pancha's humble origin nor the pressing demands his desire allowed him to reconsider" (57). Pancha in return did not complain or resists simply because she was aware that, "Before her, her mother-- and before her, her grandmother-- had suffered the same animal fate" (57).

While, Esteban continuously subjects his wife and daughter to a variety of psychological violence by imposing on them various restriction and the most striking example of physical violence occurs when Esteban comes to know about her daughters Blanca's nocturnal visits to his beloved. "Esteban Tueba was unable to restrain his evil character and he charged her with his horse, whip in the air, beating her mercilessly, lash upon lash, until the girl fell flat and rigid to the ground" (199). As Clara objects to her daughter's ill treatment, Esteban not only accuses her, "of having raised Blanca without morals, without religion, without principles, like a libertine atheist..." (200). He also slaps her face and knocks her against the wall and breaks her several teeth. The immediate result of this violence is silence of both mother and daughter and they both leave Tres Marias and go to the capital. "Clara never spoke to

her husband again. She stopped using her married name and removed the fine gold wedding ring that he had place on her finger twenty years before..."(201).

In another instance, Esteban Garcia, son of Pancha, takes her mother's revenge by molesting Esteban Trueba's granddaughter Alba on her fourteenth birthday by forcefully kissing her. "She felt a warm, brutal sensation as his rough; badly shaven skin scraped her face. She smelled his scent of stale tobacco and onion, and his violence" (327). Alba remained silent keeping the secret of the kiss with her. "She told no one of that repulsive kiss or the dreams that she had suffered afterwards, in which Garcia appeared as a green beast that tried to strangle her with his paws and asphyxiate her by shoving a slimy tentacle down her throat" (328). She would again suffer in the hands of Garcia, during the military coup, when the military junta took her and looked her in the doghouse. She was raped and beaten repeatedly by the men and the worst of them being Esteban Garcia. Allende elaborates in details the violence committed on Alba. She writes, "A brutal slap knocked her to the floor. Violent hands lifted her to her feet. Ferocious fingers fastened themselves to her breast, crushing her nipples. She was completely overcome by fear. Strange voices pressed in on her. She...kept repeating a monumental no while they beat, manhandled her, pulled off her blouse, and she could no longer think, could only say no, no and no..." (407). Trapped in the doghouse and after having suffered continuous rapes, she realised the futility of her existence and waited for the final silence to envelope her. "She gave up, deciding to end this torture once and for all. She stopped eating...She tried not to breathe or move, and began eagerly to await her death" (413).

The next step from silence is often assertion. It can occur in many forms. Women in the novel posit their assertiveness through various strategies. The first is the narrative power enjoyed by Alba. The second is by their creativity and the different kinds by which it is manifested. Women in the novel, not only express themselves by their creativity, but also unmask the hidden truths of their patriarchal society and of the dictatorship faced by them. Nivea, Clara, Blanca and Alba represent the four generations of assertive women in the novel and form a part of the liberating movement, which form the thesis of the novel.

Nivea Del Valle represents the first generation. She belongs to an upper class and does not limit herself to the sphere of home and motherhood. Instead, she fights for the rights of women and as a result is named the first feminist of the century. Allende writes, "She shared her husband's parliamentary ambitions, hoping that if he won a seat in congress she would finally secure the vote for women, for which she had fought for the past ten years, permitting none of her numerous pregnancies to get in her way"(3). Not affected by the views that people hold of her, she also. "went out at night to hang suffragette posters on walls across the city...walking throughout the heart of the city in the plain light of the day with a broom in her hand and a hat on her head, calling for women to have equal rights with men, to be allowed to vote and attend the university and for all children, even bastards, to be granted the full protection of the law" (66-67). Her actions go a long in instilling a feminist awakening in the female lineage of her family.

Clara, the Clairvoyant, represents the second generation in the novel. Allende introduces her in the first line of the novel, thereby stressing her importance in the story. Allende writes, "Barrabas arrived at the family in the usual way, wrote the girl Clara with her delicate handwriting. Already then she had the habit of writing important things and later, when she went mute, she also recorded trivialities, never suspecting that fifty years later I would use her notebooks to reclaim the past and overcome terrors of my own" (1). It was Clara who first hinted at the importance of writing, when she was ten. For Clara, writing becomes an escape from the patriarchal net of complying silence. It went out to become a voice of protest, when her diaries were later used by Alba. Alba claims, "She (Clara) filled innumerable notebooks with her private observations, recording the events of those years, thanks to which they were not erased by the mists of forgetfulness and I can now use them to reclaim her memory" (75). Her notebooks bear a testimony of all the minor and major events narrated by Alba. There are details of the earthquake, love stories, understanding of the conditions of the marginalised sections of society. By doing so she, "finally discovered her mission in life" (105). Clara then is seen following the footsteps of her mother when she holds meetings in the school and, "then use the meetings to repeat the slogans she had heard her mother shout when she chained herself to the gates of congress" (105-106).

Blanca makes the third generation in the novel. She is seen fighting at a personal level, when she chooses her lover from a society class lower than hers. At the social level, she asserts her freedom by choosing her own liberty and freedom of rejecting the marriage proposal suggested by her father and instead, eloping with her lover. Like her mother, she dedicates herself to writing. She writes letters to her mother, which Alba utilizes in filling the gaps of the story of her family. Her creativity is also seen in the crèches made from the lumps of clay by her hands.

Alba is a representative of the fourth generation. She is a daughter of Blanca and her lover. While, she actively participates in the social struggle, she also joins a group of political activists in the university. The result of which, she falls a victim to the violence initiated by the military junta. Alba decides to end her life, but she is visited by her grandmother Clara's spirit, who tells her that, "the point was not to die, since death came anyways, but to survive, which can be a miracle." (388). Allende writes, "Clara also brought the saving idea of writing in her mind, without paper or pencil, to keep her thoughts occupied and to escape the doghouse and live" (414). She adds further, "She suggested that she writes a testimony that might one day call attention to the terrible secret she was living through, so that the world would know about this horror that was taking place parallel to the peaceful existence of those who did not want to know...that only blocks away from their happy world there were others, these others who live or die on the dark side" (414).

Cixous argues that if women challenge phallogocentric discourses that describe them as passive, powerless and negative; by ratifying them, they will be able to detach themselves from the long history of cultural repression. She goes on to suggest that one such way of doing so is by adopting feminine writing and celebrating the power of a feminine

aesthetic of difference. Further, Cixous stresses on the concept of "antinarcissism", which according to her, have been taught to women, the result is that women perceive themselves as the other. However, in *The House of the Spirits*, the concept of "antinarcissism" is reversed, as it's not the women, but the men, who are the marginalized others in the novel, women on the other hand, retain both their presence and strength by the means of a feminine narrative. Alba is the major narrator who is telling the story with the help of her grandmother's diaries, while, Esteban Trueba is merely filling in the voids with his narration. Thus, Allende's employment of this dual-narrative approach can be seen as subverting the "double-voiced discourse" of women's writings, as the muted voice is male, and the dominant is female.

Vincent B. Leitch in his book *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* views that *Escritura* permits a reading of "everything that has been repressed, obscured, or unacknowledged in western thought" (2036-2037). Although, women adopt silence but they are utilizing different forms of expression. Clara writes in her diaries, "in order to see the things in their true dimensions" (77). Blanca produces crèches full of magical creatures like her dead aunt Rosa who embroidered animal imagery on her tablecloth. Finally, Alba is writing and telling the story from a feminine perspective. In a way, she is authoring the formerly devoid women narrative voice. As a result, she is empowering women by revealing and challenging the position of women in Latin American patriarchal society.

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