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Chronicling the life of Isabel Allende: house of spirits as the autobiography of Allende

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ABSTRACT

Isabel Allende is known to be one of the most expressive writers of the Latin American world. All her novels are a reflection of herself. In each novel we find a spirit of innovation and renewal. This research paper is carried out on her first novel *The House of Spirits* (1982). It focuses on the autobiographical element of the novel. The introduction will introduce the writer and the topic as well. This research will focus on the contextual evidence of her autobiography. The main focus will be her biography. The framework that the researcher has chosen will be Renza's essay *A Veto of Imagination: The Theory of Autobiography* (1972). The researcher will look into his 3 modes of autobiography and the correlation of ideology with autobiography. The content analysis will focus on the events and characters of the novel that have been extracted from Allende's life. The conclusion shows how such expression has helped Allende grow as a writer.

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Introduction

Isabel Allende is one of the most influential literary artists of Latin American literature. Known to be a staunch feminist, she has over and over again, asserted the power of a Latin American woman. Her first novel *The House of the Spirits* is a symbolic representation of her life as an unconventional woman growing up in a conventional society. Known to be a strongly feminist text, the novel also has very lucid traces of events that are inspired from Allende's life. Most characters in the book are modeled after real people. For Allende it is important to model someone after a real person because that is what makes the character real and complex. The events in the novel are an exaggerated representation of real events that are part of her personal history and the part of the history of her country.

In order to understand the autobiographical streak of her fiction *The House of a Thousand Spirits*. We will have to take a journey down to memory lane. We'll have to go back to the period where it all began.

Growing Up:

Isabel Allende was born on the 2nd of August 1942 in Lima Peru. Her father, Tomas Allende was a Chilean diplomat who had to travel a lot on the account of his job. Tomas Allende was a highly unconventional man living in a conventional society. As Zapata states in her work *Isabel Allende: Life and Spirit* (1994) that he was capable of making fun of his friends and crushing his enemies with one "witty, lapidary phrase" (p.15). However, Allende never got to know her father since he left her and her mother Francisca Barros in 1945, when Allende was barely three years old. The only memory she has of her father are from the pictures she has seen and the stories she has heard from her mother and other relatives (McNeese). In her book *My Invented Country* (2004), she shares that:

"My father went out to buy cigarettes and never came back.

The truth is that he didn't start out to buy cigarettes, as everyone always says, but instead he went out on a wild spree disguised as a Peruvian Indian woman wearing bright petticoats and a wig with long braids. He left my mother in

Lima with a pile of unpaid bills and three children, the youngest a new born baby" (p.28)

This imaginative but exaggerated description of her father's abandonment shows her anger at a man who was never a part of her life. However, with her mother she developed a very cordial relationship. This woman was a source of stability for Allende. In John Rodden's *Conversations with Isabel Allende* (1999) Allende says that "her love has nourished me" (p.71). After her husband had abandoned her Francisca had no other choice but to return to her native land Chile with three children in tow. It was her parents Augustin and Isabel Barros who gave stability to her children.

In her book *Paula* (1994) Allende reminisces, that her childhood was not happy but it was; nonetheless very interesting (p.51). It was people like her grandparents who made her life interesting and helped her shape into the artist she is today.

Isabel Allende grew up in a household dominated by patriarchy. But this was a very common practice in Chile in those times (McNeese). Her grandfather was a very strict man. He was never afraid to voice his opinion or assert his authority as the head of the family. This man had a strong inclination of nationalism and instilled the values of one's love for nation in his granddaughter. Remembering her grandfather Allende often talks about how her grandfather would tell her stories about Chile so she help her form a connection with the country that is her homeland.

"He always said that just as Romans live among ruins and fountains without seeing them, we Chileans live in the most dazzling county on the planet without appreciating it" (p.17)

Augustin Barros was a very short tempered man. Allende still remembers how he would lose control of his rage every time she blundered in her history and geography lessons. It was her grandfather's attitude that sowed the seeds of feminism in Allende's heart; and led her to become one of the most renowned feminist in the Latin American literary circle, in particular, and the global literary circle in general.

Isabel Barros Moreira was a self-proclaimed seer and psychic (McNeese). Talking about her grandmother Allende says that

“My grandmother had extrasensory power; she was half prophet, Half telepathic and she could even move objects without touching them. She had a group of friends, the sister Mora, who were quite famous at the time. They would get together with my grandmother and have spiritual séances. My mother did all this with great sense of humor.” (p.18)

The elder Isabel professed that she could not only see spirits but communicate with them as well. She said that the space is full of presences, the dead and living all mixed together (p.70). To Allende she was a guardian angel (p.19) to this day she feels her presence with her where ever she goes.

Allende was a solitary child who lived in a world that was the result of her imaginative musings. Books were her only companions and she would spend hours in her grandparent's mansion cellar reading books of Shaw, Twain, or French writers like Verne. Allende would often re-create the characters she read about on a miniature stage of her own making. She would make her characters out of toothpicks and other raw material, give them dialogues and perform a whole act on her miniature stage. Even as a child she was a great story teller mesmerizing her two brothers with enchanting tales of her own imaginings. This activity developed the originality out of which she created the characters of her own novels.

Allende's grandmother passed away when she was eight years old. Her death was a huge loss for Allende and her grandfather Augustin was crushed. He never re-covered from the shock of losing his wife. Around the same time, her mother re-married. Allende's step-father Ramon Huidoro is another person who has had a profound influence on her life. He was like the father she never had. Just like her grandparents and mother Huidoro also shaped many pleasant memories in her life. About him Allende said that

“He was my true father. We travelled widely with him and he was the one who formed me. I owe him my intellectual inquisitiveness, my curiosity and my discipline” (p.168)

Speaking Out:

From a very young age Allende felt the need to speak up against the injustices that were common part of her society. Especially the injustices committed against women.

“At a very young age she was painfully aware of the fact that the world was divided into two hemispheres male and female. Women had to live up to expectations that men were exempt from”

When she was 17 years old she was done with the study sessions she had with her grandfather and was already engaged to her future husband Michael (p.40). She did not know what to do now. Normally at her age women were expected to be married and taking care of their household.

“It was expected that my brothers would be professional- if possible doctors and engineers..... but I was to settle for a largely decorative job until motherhood occupied me completely”

Since her fiancé was busy with his studies, she decided to get some part time job to pass her time. After a few odd jobs the United Nations. While working there she came across some journalists. They trained her in journalism and during her training she came into television. She hosted a weekly program that was offered by the United Nation in Chile (McNeese). By the time she was a full-fledged reporter she was married and settled in her domestic life. She was 19. She developed a strong

passion for journalism and did an amazing job as a reporter without taking any course in the subject. However, Allende remembers her grandfather was not impressed by her profession

“My grandfather was indignant when I told him what I was doing; he considered reporting an occupation for knaves; no one of sound mind would talk with the press, and no decent person would choose a calling in which the main order of work was talking about other people.” (p.125)

Journalism gave her an outlet to answer all the questions that had been haunting her for so long. As Zapata states in his book that, “She questioned everything that was institutionally sacred” (p.37). In 1967, she started working for the first feminist magazine of Chile *Paula*. She was one of the collaborators. The articles that she wrote in her column were bold, feisty and aggressive. She would write articles on subjects that were considered a taboo in her society. She embarked on topics such as “Sex, marriage, social norms and values and any other topic that would arouse an emotional response from her readers” (p.49). Hoards of angry letters to the magazine about her articles did not manage to change her mind on being open and direct about such subjects. To the younger generation she served as a source of inspiration and for the older generation she was a nuisance who did nothing but fuel young people's minds with garbage. By this time, she had gained quite a reputation for herself and her magazine. She used her column to vent her frustration and anger on the patriarchy that was “entrenched in Chile” (p.49). As she states herself

It delved into politics, reported on radical movements around the world, and, in general, it touched on all that which had been untouchable up to ten in Chile” (p.177)

The magazine talked about everything that was a taboo matter in the Chilean society. The topics ranged from birth control to abortion, divorce to male chauvinism, psychological disorders or mental disorder and of course the political conditions as well. The mainframe concept, however, was equality of the two sexes (McNeese). For Allende *Paula* served as an escape valve (McNeese) from the madness she inherited from her ancestors (p.52).

Political Upheaval:

In order to understand the political upheaval of 1973 that totally turned the course of Chile's fate; we would have to look into the political scenario that led to this ill-fated event. Chile occupied almost half of northeastern part of South America when it was occupied by Spanish conquistadors in the 1500's. In 1818, they earned their independence from the Spanish conquerors. The infant country had difficulty handling the responsibilities of a state in the beginning, but by the early 1900's they gained some economic prosperity. Their economy boomed during the First World War. They had rich storage of nitrate which was an important component in making weapons. This trade proved fruitful for Chile. However, the poor could not benefit from the wealth that the country got from its exports. Farmers' miners and laborers started harboring bitter resentment for the upper class for not giving them their equal rights. This led to social unrest which culminated into radical political movements that gained momentum in the 1920's. The country had split into two parties the Conservatives and the Communists.

Salvador Allende was a co-founder of one such Communist party “The Socialist Party”. He was the cousin of Tomas Allende and godfather to Isabel Allende. He was the elected in the Chilean National Congress in 1937 and to the Senate in 1945. Salvador Allende ran for presidency in four consecutive

elections of 1952, 1958, 1964 and 1970. In 1970, finally came into power. He was the first Marxist president of Chile. The left wing feared that with Allende in power Communism would take a strong hold on Chile and that was something they could not afford to happen. Allende changed land reforms, nationalized the industrial, economic centers and both businesses national and international. During this time a silent war between the Right and Left wing carried on with Communists painting murals on the walls and the Conservatives driving through streets in automobiles (McNeese). Inflation reached a crippling level and there was constant shortage of food (McNeese) "People spend hours waiting to buy a scrawny chicken or cup of cooking oil" (p.59). Those people who could afford food would buy their ration from the black market. Allende was one of those people; she would get food from the black market and store the food for her family and herself. She would "horde food attained with the cunning of a smuggler" (p.59)

Isabel Allende's uncle was an ambitious man who had great plans for the future. During one of his lunches with his granddaughter he told her that he would not leave the presidential palace and that is exactly what happened when the military coup arrived at the presidential palace on September 11th 1973 (McNeese). With the encouragement of the Americans who found Allende's regime threatening to their power; Latin America witnessed one of its bloodiest military coup. In which thousands of men suffered. The presidential palace was bombed and the military killed Salvador Allende. The government of General Pinochet had an iron hand. His regime swore to wipe Communism from the face of the country. People involved in the Communist cause were prosecuted, tortured and killed.

As is stated in *History of the World* (1995)

"The government suspended legislative, ordered severe censorship and used violence against political opponents. Many Chileans left the country and the United Nation criticized them for the violations of human rights" (p. 798)

Allende worked for the underground relief groups. With the help of her contacts she helped those who were prosecuted. She volunteered in churches that were providing food and other necessities to the prosecuted families (McNeese). Using her car "Citroen" she took political refugees to safer places and gave them shelter from political threat. She did not care about jeopardizing her own freedom for the freedom of other.

"Her work had a humanitarian element, motivated by a strong spirit of compassion for the oppressed" (p.65).

But it was more the attraction of adventure, of experiencing the thrill of secrecy and defiantly opposing the Chilean government was part of who Allende was and still is (McNeese). For 20 years Chileans had to go through a humiliating period of fear, dread and censorship. Outspoken correspondents like Allende were fired. Because according to the regime Feminism posed the same threats as Marxism. Soon enough Allende became fearful her life and the life of her family. After receiving a death threat she decided to leave the country for the safety of her family. In Linda Gould Levine's *Isabel Allende* (2002) she explained the reason for her self-imposed exile

"I left because I could no longer stand the fear. I felt a visceral terror in Chile.... It is difficult to understand fear when you have not lived it. It is something that transforms us that takes over completely" (p.5)

She escaped to Venezuela and from there travelled the world. She did not return to Chile for 13 years. Outside of Chile she experienced a world totally different from the world she came from. She found a sense of freedom something that she did

not have back home (McNeese). During her time in Venezuela which seemed like a "professional desert" to her (p.69), she had multiple affairs behind her husband's back. But the one affair that led to a permanent crack in her marriage was the one she had with an Argentinian musician. Michael discovered this affair but chose to forgive her. Later on, however the stress of her work and their past differences had led them to a divorce. However, today they stand as friends and often meet when Allende visits Chile.

Boom Generation:

The 1960's was the era of the Boom Generation. It was during this time that Latin American writers started gaining recognition. Their works started getting translated in different languages. The leading writers of this literary advancement were Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Octavio Paz, Mario Vargas Llosa and Miguel Angel Asturias. The fiction of the Boom is undeniably engrossing but equivocally male centered. *Hundred Years of Solitude* (1968) are the dazzling array of the Bendua men distributed over several generations (Rossman). It was Allende who gave Latin American women a voice. Critics appreciated her fresh, feminine perspective of Latin American world. Coleman suggests in *New York Times Book Review*

"The first woman to approach on the same scale as the others the tormented patriarchal world of traditional Hispanic society and to argue that the enraged class violence in Latin America is a debate among men who are deaf but who have fixed and unalterable ideas on all subjects. And she has done all this in an absorbing and distinguished work that matches her predecessors' in quality as well as scope"

Pablo Neruda played a very important role in making her an author. He told her that she was the worst journalist in Chile, because she made herself the center of everything. She should write novels since in literature this vice is a virtue (McNeese).

Conception of *The House of the Spirits*:

While still on in Venezuela he received a letter informing her of her grandfather's last moments. Since she couldn't be there, she decided to write to him a letter that came on to become the manuscript of Allende's first novel. With the intend of narrating her story in her own words in her own way she started writing a novel (p.75).

As McNeese states in *Isabel Allende: The Great Hispanic Heritage* (2006):

"What had begun as a letter to her dying grandfather, had become a 500 page family history filled with faces she had known in her life, as well as, those she had been told about by relatives who have lived before and seen things she has not" (p.77)

The House of the Spirits garnered instant success. From then on, there was no looking back. She cemented her place in the literary world with proceeding works like *Of Love and Shadows* (1984), *Eve Luna* (1987) and *Paula* (), *Daughter of Fortune* (1999) and *Zorro* (2005).

Theoretical Framework:

The research will be conducted under the framework of Louis A. Renza's essay *A Veto of Imagination: The Theory of Autobiography* (1977). He talks about three modes of autobiography the Memoir mode, Confessional mode and Narcissistic mode. The Memoir mode links the past with the present. The author dwells into memories that have made him or her person he or she is today. Renza says that memory is a very important part of an autobiography. This point can be verified by Allende's own idea that with memory man cannot exist

(McNeese). The Confessional mode is the mode in which through his character and events make a silent confession of his actions in real life. In the Narcissistic mode has more to do with anarchism. The writer blends the exclusive sense of self disclosed through his or her act into exclusive thought. It basically involves a minority persona (p.13). For example a woman writer would define herself over and against what to her is the persuasive system of ruthless patriarchy (Renza). According to Renza ideology compliments the autobiography. Whatever ideology the writer holds helps the reader understand the writer's view about life and the world in general. The researcher plans to adopt these techniques in her analysis.

The house of the Spirits is a family chronicles revolving around three generations of the Trueba women. These women are strong, independent and outspoken, with a mind of their own. Even their names are synonymous to luminosity. Clara means clear, Blanca means white and Alba means dawn. There is yet another woman who sparks the idea of Enlightenment and that is Clara's mother Nivea whose name means snow. All these women give an aura of renewal. Their feminism comes from Allende's tendency to give her heroines a voice. The novel spans over fifty years from the 1910's to the 70's. These four women represent the developing stages of feminism in the Chilean society. All four women are dominant and have more power than their partners. Although, Esteban Trueba is a ruthless man yet he is helpless before Clara because he is hopelessly in love with her. Pedro Tercero is a revolutionist with strong ideals and a mind of his own. Yet, he too is hopelessly in love with Blanca and even though he has countless affairs during his years away from her, he still is not able to get her out of his mind. Similarly, Miguel feels betrayed when Alba hides from him the truth about her identity yet he decides to forgive her because he too loves her a lot. These women represent Allende's ideal of what women should be like. They should be free and complete human beings who are able to fulfill themselves and are not dependent on men (Rodden).

The two major characters of the novel i.e. Esteban and Clara are based on Allende's own grandparents. Esteban Trueba voices the strong opinions

"He maintained that magic, like cooking and religion was a particularly feminine affair" (p.136)

His concern for his daughter Blanca to settle down with a wealthy husband and for his sons Jaime and Nicola to have professional careers mirrors the concern of her grandfather in specific and of many upper middle class Chilean families in general. The cordial relationship he shares with his granddaughter is the reflection of the heartwarming relation that Allende shared with her grandfather which led to the creation of this novel. The character of Rosa the Beautiful is based after Allende's grand aunt Rosa who was her grandfather's first love.

Clara is the exaggerated version of Isabel Barron. Clara exhibits all the traits that Allende describes her grandmother of having. Clara's power to predict the future, to move things from one place to another without touching them and her spiritual encounters are all the things Allende remembers her grandmother being capable of. The Mora sisters are the fictionalized personas of real women Allende knew as a child. They were her grandmother's friends. These three women represent fate. These sisters can also be seen in mythological sense. In Greek mythology the Mora sisters hold the string of life. When a child is born they predict his/her future and at death they cut the string of life so release man of his physical body. The same significance is given to the Mora sisters in the novel

one of whom predicts her cruel fate that Alba beholds. Throughout the novel Clara has a very strong presence even after her death. This is symbolic of Allende's own feelings about her grandmother after her death. When she was writing this novel she recalls that her words were coming with tremendous ease because her grandmother the clairvoyant was whispering words to her from the grave. This can also be seen in the novel when Clara's spirit appears to Alba to suggest her to start writing a journal in order to ease her pain. Esteban is crushed at Clara's death; he swears to wear black and only black and no other color after death. This is a symbol of his dedication to her. The effect of the death of his wife is so strong that "in a single night he passed from his healthy middle years to a shrunken, stuttering old age" (p.296). This situation reflects the situation of her grandfather after his wife's death.

To Allende her father was a mystery and this mystery she represents in the character of Jean de Satigny. Because Alba was the illegitimate child of Blanca and Pedro Tercero, she is told that her father Jean de Satigny (the legitimate husband of Blanca) died a long time ago. Just like Allende the few things she knew about her father was through tales told to her by her Uncle Jaime and grandmother. As a young woman she is asked to come and identify her father, when she sees it she feels no closeness to him.

"She stared at his hands: they were not those of a refined, intelligent aristocrat, but of a man who had nothing interesting to say" (p.265-66)

This event is reflective of Allende's own visit to a morgue to identify a father (Tomas Allende) she had no recollection of and for whom she held no fatherly love. Pedro Tercero on the other hand, is a fragmentation of her stepfather Ramon Huidoro. Making Pedro Tercero Alba's real father reflects her own unconscious wish the Huidoro could be her real father.

The Poet and the Candidate/President are major part of the story. The Poet is known to be of the best poets of all time. As Satigny comments after reading the book of poems given by Blanca that:

"It was the best poetry ever written, and that even in French, the language of the arts, there was nothing to compare it to" (p.195)

The Poet is none other than the Chilean Nobel Prize winner Pablo Neruda. The novel recounts his success from the time he recites poetry in the De Valle house with Clara on his lap to the time of his death two weeks after the military coup. In the novel, she depicts a grand procession of his funeral which is attended by Esteban and Alba. Even though, Esteban did not agree with Neruda's Communist ideals yet even he was upset about his death. Allende symbolizes his death as "the symbolic burial freedom" (p.388).

The Candidate and later the President is a tribute that Allende has given to Salvador Allende. His heroic death in the presidential palace speaks of Allende's respect she had for her uncle. The heroic way in which he faces the military with a bazooka in his hand symbolizes his loyalty to his nation. His death is termed suicide but everyone knows that it is cold blooded murder. Throughout the novel Allende does not mention where all the actions are based on but it is clear that she talks about Chile. The reason why she veiled Neruda and Allende under the veil of the President and the Poet is because back when she was writing the novel any peace that spoke in favor of Communism and its beholder was banned. But this tactic did not stop the banning of the novel in Chile.

Alba's revolutionary activity, alongside Miguel, to save the targeted people from being prosecuted reminds one of Allende's own efforts. Alba does this out of love for Miguel and out of a sense of adventure. Here we see Allende's own confession of doing her relief activities for the fun of it. Another confessional note can be seen in Blanca's countless affairs she has after the failure of marriage with Satigny. During her stay in Venezuela; Allende too had countless affairs behind her husband's back.

The personalities of all three Trueba women are symbolic of Allende's own self-contained persona. As a child Clara carried a thirst for knowledge and would read all the books her adventurous Uncle Marco would bring whenever he came back to the De Valle family home.

"Little Clara read all the time. Her interest in books was indiscriminate"

She lived in a world of her own invention (p.82). This echoes the childhood of Allende. The cellar in the bog mansion is symbolic of the cellar in Allende's grandparent's mansion where she spent hours with her imaginary creations. Alba too, is a fragmentation of Allende's personality. As a child she plays imaginary games with her uncle Jaime.

"Alba would go out and return pulling an imaginary pachyderm on an invisible rope" (p.270)

The House of Spirits is sort of a chronicle of Allende's life. It's like a journal in which she has given vent to her feelings and emotions and talked about things that could have been. For example, the way Alba is treated by the military regime and by Esteban Garcia depicts her own fear of what might have happened if she stayed back in Chile during the coup. The dairies of Clara are of great significance, since in them we see a recorded history of a family with an eccentric past, a family that mirrors Allende's own eccentric relatives and their importance in her life.

Conclusion:

House of Spirits has everything drama, romance, suspense and the supernatural. It is the exaggerated expression of

Allende's own roller coaster life. In this novel, Allende shows us all the facades of her personality. In Clara, we see her tranquil nature in Blanca she reflects the fierce lover and in Alba she shows us her independent spirit as a woman and above all as a human being. Her love for Chile is represented in the character of the Poet and the President, and her despise for the unjust patriarchy is molded in the form of Esteban Trueba.

To conclude, one can say that this novel is a recorded journal of instances that led Isabel Allende to become one of the finest writers of the Latin American literary world. Plus it served as a touch stone on which all of Allende's future novels are measured against.

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