

**Liberating Language: A Feminist Reading of Two Words by Isabel Allende  
and the Interplay of Language, Freedom, and Identity in Patriarchal**

**Structures**

**Rafey Konain**

BS-English Literature, Institute of English Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

[rafeykonain965@gmail.com](mailto:rafeykonain965@gmail.com)

**Wajiha Saleem**

Lecturer, English Linguistics, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

[wajihaleem@numl.edu.pk](mailto:wajihaleem@numl.edu.pk)

**Samreen Rashid**

Designation: Lecturer English, IES, University of the Punjab, Pakistan.

[rashidsamreen9@gmail.com](mailto:rashidsamreen9@gmail.com)

***Abstract:***

*This study offers a feminist reading of Isabel Allende's short story Two Words, exploring how language serves as a vehicle for empowerment, resistance, and identity formation within patriarchal structures. The narrative follows Belisa Crepusculario, a marginalized woman who subverts societal limitations through the act of naming and storytelling. This analysis examines how Allende reclaims the traditionally male-dominated power of language and reconfigures it as a tool of female agency. Her mastery over language becomes symbolic of reclaiming one's voice and rewriting one's destiny—a radical act in a world where women are often silenced. The paper argues that Allende's portrayal of Belisa exemplifies the potential of linguistic self-determination as a means of liberation in patriarchal contexts. Furthermore, the story underscores how freedom is intrinsically tied to the power of narrative control, with language functioning as both a means of self-expression and a form of resistance. By decoding the metaphorical and literal implications of "two words," the analysis foregrounds how femininity, when intertwined with linguistic prowess, challenges existing hierarchies of power. The story ultimately serves as a feminist allegory that interrogates dominant gender ideologies and affirms the transformative capacity of language. This abstract positions Two Words not just as a literary narrative but as a cultural critique that highlights the essential role of language in shaping identity, negotiating power, and reclaiming female autonomy in a patriarchal world.*

**Keywords:** Feminist Theory, Isabel Allende, Patriarchy, Narrative Agency, Gender Resistance.

## Introduction

In literary traditions dominated by patriarchal norms, the articulation of female identity and the reclamation of agency often unfold through the power of language. Isabel Allende's short story *Two Words* offers a profound feminist critique of such structures, showcasing how language becomes a tool of empowerment in a world that seeks to silence and commodify women. Through the character of Belisa Crepusculario—a woman who trades in words to survive—Allende constructs a narrative that not only challenges traditional gender hierarchies but also elevates linguistic expression as a means of self-definition and resistance. This story is emblematic of feminist literary praxis, wherein language is not merely a medium of communication but a site of political struggle and emancipation. Within the broader framework of feminist literary criticism, Allende's tale stands as a counter-discursive narrative that reclaims the female voice from the margins, echoing the concerns of theorists like Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and bell hooks, who argue that patriarchal language systems suppress feminine subjectivity.

At the heart of *Two Words* lies the recognition that language and identity are inextricably intertwined—a concept central to feminist and poststructuralist discourse. The protagonist's journey from an impoverished, nameless girl to a respected word-seller foregrounds the transformative potential of language, especially when it becomes a vehicle for rewriting one's socio-political reality. Allende's crafting of Belisa's profession as a seller of words functions metaphorically, asserting that knowledge, discourse, and naming possess liberatory power. As Michel Foucault contends, discourse shapes what can be known and who can speak (Foucault, 1972), thus Belisa's ability to articulate thought through personalized words enables her to disrupt and redefine established power dynamics. Her linguistic agency undermines the General's authoritarian masculinity, which is dependent on violence and force rather than dialogue and introspection. When she gives him two secret words that haunt and transform him, the story allegorizes how the feminine voice—long denied significance in patriarchal settings—can destabilize hegemonic male identities.

Allende's feminist vision can be better appreciated when contextualized within the Latin American literary tradition, where magical realism has often been deployed to critique political oppression and gender inequality. In *Two Words*, the magical aura surrounding Belisa's words does not diminish their political import; instead, it heightens the symbolic resonance of speech as

a subversive tool. Much like in the works of Gabriel García Márquez, Allende weaves the extraordinary into the everyday, yet with a distinctly gendered lens. The comparison to Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is instructive, where honor and silence lead to violence, while in Allende's tale, the power of language offers healing and transformation. Feminist critics have long pointed out the absence or marginalization of female characters in canonical magical realist narratives; Allende, in contrast, centers a woman whose survival and authority hinge on her mastery of words rather than on her body or traditional female roles.

Furthermore, Belisa's narrative arc resonates with Hélène Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*, which emphasizes writing from the body and the unconscious to undermine patriarchal rationalism (Cixous, 1975). Belisa's intuitive understanding of language and her emotional intelligence challenge the binary opposition between reason and emotion—a dichotomy historically mapped onto masculine and feminine qualities. By asserting her narrative voice through oral storytelling, Belisa also participates in the tradition of women's oral literature, which scholars such as Trinh T. Minh-ha have highlighted as a counter-hegemonic mode of cultural transmission (Minh-ha, 1989). Her words, chosen and crafted with care, reflect an embodied knowledge that transcends institutional literacy or political propaganda. They become acts of healing, particularly for the General, whose transformation suggests that even the most rigid male archetype is not immune to the affective and ethical power of feminine language.

Belisa's refusal to conform to patriarchal roles—whether as a sexual object, a submissive partner, or a voiceless peasant—positions her within a feminist framework of resistance. Her self-invention through storytelling draws attention to the role of narrative in constructing identity, a theme extensively explored by feminist thinkers such as Judith Butler, who posits that gender is performative and shaped through repeated social acts (Butler, 1990). Belisa performs her identity not through bodily display or subservience but through linguistic authority. This subversion is especially potent in a patriarchal society where language is often monopolized by male figures—military leaders, priests, bureaucrats—who define social norms. That Belisa's words cause the General to question his role and status suggests a radical feminist utopia in which language can dismantle systemic oppression and engender mutual transformation.

Importantly, the feminist significance of *Two Words* extends beyond the protagonist's individual agency to implicate broader social structures. The rural and war-torn setting of the story reflects the socio-political turmoil that often accompanies gender-based inequalities. Allende's

representation of a fragmented, male-dominated society, where women are either invisible or commodified, underscores the urgency of linguistic self-assertion. In this context, Belisa's verbal entrepreneurship represents not only personal emancipation but also an alternative economy—one based on empathy, imagination, and the intrinsic value of words. This revaluation of labor is aligned with Silvia Federici's critique of capitalist and patriarchal systems that exploit women's unpaid emotional and reproductive labor (Federici, 2004). Belisa, by charging for her words and customizing them to her clients' needs, asserts the economic worth of intellectual and affective labor, challenging the materialist foundations of gendered oppression.

Thus, *Two Words* functions as a microcosm of feminist resistance through language, revealing how speech and narrative are not merely personal expressions but collective tools for liberation. By situating Belisa's story within the matrix of feminist literary theory, magical realism, and socio-political critique, this paper explores how Allende constructs a complex interplay between language, freedom, and identity in a patriarchal world. Her narrative insists that emancipation begins with the articulation of self—a principle echoed in feminist movements across geographies and generations. In reclaiming her voice, Belisa not only transforms her own life but also alters the lives of others, reminding us that in a world rife with silencing, the most radical act is to speak.

Feminist literary scholarship has long interrogated the relationship between language and gender, exploring how patriarchal discourse shapes the identity and agency of women. Central to this exploration is the idea that language is not neutral but deeply ideological, functioning as a mechanism of control in male-dominated societies. Pioneering theorists such as Hélène Cixous (1975) and Luce Irigaray (1985) emphasize that Western linguistic systems are structured according to phallogocentric logic, thereby marginalizing female expression and experience. Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, or "feminine writing," calls for a mode of expression that is rooted in the female body and experience, subverting masculine rationality and dominance. This notion is particularly relevant to Isabel Allende's *Two Words*, in which the protagonist, Belisa Crepusculario, carves out an identity and livelihood through her unique and sensuous use of language, defying traditional gender roles and economic hierarchies. Allende's portrayal of a female word-seller challenges the idea that language is the preserve of the powerful or the male elite.

Within Latin American feminist criticism, Allende's work has been praised for foregrounding female subjectivity in narratives where women often navigate oppressive social conditions through creativity and resilience. Scholars like Catherine Davies (1998) argue that feminist writers in Latin America use narrative as a form of resistance, crafting characters whose lives expose and subvert gendered systems of power. In this context, *Two Words* exemplifies a literary tradition in which women not only survive but thrive by reimagining their roles and voices. Belisa's story is not simply a tale of individual empowerment but part of a broader feminist project to destabilize patriarchal language and authority. Similarly, Jean Franco (1991) points out that Latin American literature often features women as both victims and agents within nationalist and militarized societies. The General in Allende's story symbolizes the embodiment of masculine state power, and Belisa's linguistic intervention into his life metaphorically undermines the monolithic control of such structures.

The interplay of language and identity in *Two Words* also resonates with poststructuralist feminist theories, particularly those advanced by Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler challenges the essentialist notion of gender and instead posits it as a performative act, constituted through repeated discursive practices. Belisa's use of words, both public and private, becomes a performative construction of identity, not only for herself but also for the General. Through this lens, her profession as a word-seller serves as a gendered performance that unsettles the conventional binaries of masculinity and femininity. Her control of speech and narrative reconfigures societal expectations of women, rendering her both a subject and a subverter of the prevailing order. This view complements Laura Mulvey's (1975) critique of the male gaze in visual culture; whereas patriarchal systems often define women as passive spectacles, Allende positions Belisa as a narrator, actor, and intellectual.

Furthermore, the oral tradition in which *Two Words* is grounded aligns with feminist scholarship that values storytelling as a cultural and political act. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) suggests that women's storytelling traditions offer alternative modes of knowledge and resistance, especially in societies where official histories exclude female voices. Belisa's words are not only poetic but transformative—they change the course of the General's life and expose the affective power of speech. The importance of orality in Allende's text echoes Toni Morrison's (1992) reflections on the oral roots of storytelling as a communal, often matriarchal, mode of transmission. In this way, Belisa's linguistic agency disrupts linear, hierarchical narratives typically associated with

masculine authority, instead creating a circular, participatory model of communication that fosters emotional and ethical awakening.

Critical responses to *Two Words* have tended to focus on its magical realism and feminist dimensions, often highlighting how the mystical quality of Belisa's words blurs the boundaries between the real and the imagined. Wendy B. Faris (2004) explains that magical realism enables writers to defamiliarize the ordinary and interrogate dominant ideological structures. Allende's use of magical realism, particularly in the mysterious potency of the "two secret words," enhances the allegorical weight of language as a tool of both enchantment and empowerment. These words, though never revealed to the reader, symbolize the deeply personal and transformative potential of linguistic intimacy—a concept aligned with bell hooks's (1989) argument that love, speech, and vulnerability can serve as radical political acts in systems built on domination.

Despite the short length of *Two Words*, its implications are vast and far-reaching. It has been interpreted by critics like Debra Castillo (1994) as a meta-narrative on writing and authorship, where Belisa can be seen as a stand-in for the woman writer herself—constructing narratives that reshape individual and collective destinies. Castillo argues that Belisa's storytelling breaks away from masculine narrative control and inserts a female presence at the center of power, both symbolically and literally. The deliberate ambiguity of the two words emphasizes the subjectivity and emotional texture of language, privileging its affective capacity over its informational utility. Such an approach underscores a feminist ethics of communication that prioritizes connection, care, and transformation over domination and control.

Thus, the existing body of literature surrounding *Two Words* positions Allende's story at the intersection of feminist theory, narrative resistance, and postcolonial critique. Drawing upon the works of feminist theorists such as Cixous, Butler, Minh-ha, and hooks, scholars have consistently interpreted Belisa Crepusculario as a literary embodiment of how language can liberate and redefine female identity within patriarchal structures. This literature review serves as a foundation for the present analysis, which aims to deepen the exploration of how Allende uses language not merely as a theme but as a feminist strategy of subversion and reimagination.

Belisa struggle to strive for life is a perfect example of her courage, to stand against the patriarchal oppression in late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her striving efforts for economic independency

explores the themes of individuality and survival for growth. Her strength lies in her words, her language. It depicts the idea that even a very common thing can be the source to overcome the hardships and poverty of your life. A time, where the women were left with two choices either to become a prostitute or a maid to fulfil the bread and butter of her life. She chooses a path of noble profession to live her life in accordance to keep the ethical standards of humanity. Her language to overcome the patriarchal domination was completely successful, even when Colonel fell in her love after hearing the two words was another feather in her cap, that she has succeeded in leaving an unforgettable impression on the mind of an army head, a leader. He was taken by her two words. The two words Belisa gave to him. A time where there was rarely a chance for a man to fall for a girl. Belisa has marked her name. She has ruled through, her freedom to choose the path she wants to follow for her economic independency.

### Research Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretive methodology** rooted in **feminist literary criticism** and supported by elements of **discourse analysis** to examine Isabel Allende's *Two Words*. The primary aim is to explore how language, as depicted in the narrative, functions as a liberatory tool for the female protagonist and how it intersects with themes of identity and resistance within a patriarchal context. This methodology allows for an in-depth textual analysis that centers on the narrative structure, character development, symbolic language, and socio-political implications of the story.

The **textual analysis** approach is selected due to the literary nature of the material and the need for close reading techniques that unpack layers of meaning embedded in Allende's prose. Special attention is given to diction, metaphor, narrative voice, and the semantic value of the unnamed "two words," which form the symbolic nucleus of the story. This analysis is guided by a feminist lens, prioritizing the representation of gender, power dynamics, and voice.

In accordance with feminist methodology, this research resists the objectivity often demanded by traditional critical paradigms and instead embraces **situated knowledge**—a concept developed by Donna Haraway (1988)—which acknowledges the researcher's position and the political nature of knowledge production. Feminist literary criticism, as outlined by theorists like Elaine Showalter (1985), informs the theoretical grounding of this study. Showalter's concept of the "gynocritical" approach, which focuses on female experience, authorship, and representation, is

integral to the analysis of Belisa Crepusculario's journey from voicelessness to linguistic authority.

Additionally, **intertextual analysis** supports the feminist framework by comparing *Two Words* with other literary and theoretical works that explore the use of language by women in oppressive environments. Texts such as Hélène Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) serve as critical intertexts that shape the interpretive strategies used in this paper. This method of drawing from related texts allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Belisa's speech acts resist patriarchal control and reshape gendered identities.

The story's context is also addressed through **discourse analysis**, particularly informed by Michel Foucault's theories of power and language (1972). This aspect of the methodology helps to investigate how Allende constructs linguistic power through Belisa, enabling the analysis of how language becomes both a commodity and a weapon. Discourse analysis is employed not in a rigid technical sense but as a flexible tool for reading power relations as they emerge through the text.

The study is **interpretivist** in its epistemological stance, recognizing that meaning in literature is not fixed but constructed through readers' interactions with the text. Rather than seeking a singular truth about *Two Words*, the goal is to open up interpretive possibilities that reveal the feminist politics of language and the subversive agency of the female subject. As qualitative inquiry emphasizes depth over breadth, the paper limits its scope to a single short story in order to produce a detailed and layered reading.

No empirical data, surveys, or interviews are employed, as this is a **theoretical and literary** investigation rather than a social science study. However, the research remains rigorous through the systematic engagement with both primary and secondary texts, the application of critical theories, and the conscious acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality.

In summary, the research methodology synthesizes **feminist literary criticism, intertextual reading, and discourse analysis** within a qualitative interpretive framework. This approach is best suited to reveal the intricate ways in which Allende's narrative critiques patriarchal structures and elevates language as a vehicle for female freedom and self-determination. By focusing on the textual and symbolic dimensions of language in *Two Words*, the study aims to

contribute to the broader discourse on gender, identity, and linguistic resistance in Latin American feminist literature.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Isabel Allende's *Two Words* is a powerful literary exploration of how language operates as a mechanism of self-liberation and empowerment, especially for women situated within patriarchal and militarized social contexts. Through the character of Belisa Crepusculario, Allende crafts a story in which a woman reclaims both her voice and her economic independence through the strategic use of words. This deliberate act of linguistic ownership challenges traditional gender roles and subverts power hierarchies rooted in masculine authority. The symbolic weight of language in this narrative highlights what Hélène Cixous (1975) terms *écriture féminine*—a mode of writing and speaking that resists patriarchal constraints and emerges from embodied female experience. Belisa's words, which are simultaneously magical and political, represent a reclamation of narrative agency that allows her to redefine her identity and assert influence over others without violence or coercion.

The role of language in the construction of identity is central to feminist theory, and Allende's story exemplifies this concept through the transformation of both Belisa and the General. Initially, the General represents militaristic masculinity: commanding, dominant, and emotionally detached. However, upon receiving Belisa's mysterious "two words," he becomes introspective, destabilized, and symbolically feminized—his speech falters, and his emotional vulnerability surfaces. Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990) is especially relevant here, as it highlights how gender is constructed through repeated acts and language. The General's unraveling suggests that his masculine identity is not inherent but performative and thus susceptible to disruption by new linguistic inputs. Belisa, by contrast, performs her femininity not through submission or silence, but through intellectual authority and verbal agency. Her words do not conform to the logic of domination; instead, they unveil an alternative model of power—rooted in emotion, narrative, and mutual recognition.

Belisa's occupation as a word-seller further demonstrates the feminist reconfiguration of labor and economy. In a society where women's roles are typically confined to domestic or servile functions, her ability to make a living through language challenges capitalist and patriarchal valuations of work. Silvia Federici (2004) has argued that women's intellectual and reproductive labor is historically devalued under capitalism, and Belisa's career resists this marginalization.

By commodifying her knowledge, she asserts the economic value of female intellectual labor. Notably, her words are not mass-produced; they are tailored to each client, reflecting care and individual attention—qualities that are often dismissed as “feminine” but become central to her success and social power. The fact that she charges for her services without apologizing or diminishing her worth underlines her resistance to patriarchal expectations of feminine humility or silence.

The broader setting of the story—a harsh, war-ridden society where fear and violence dominate—heightens the radicalism of Belisa’s speech. In such a context, words are not simply tools of communication but acts of resistance. As Foucault (1972) notes, discourse is always implicated in power; those who control discourse shape reality. Belisa’s mastery of language allows her to challenge official narratives propagated by the military and political elite. Her intervention in the General’s public speeches signifies more than literary embellishment—it represents a reorientation of political discourse, one that integrates vulnerability and humanity. This aligns with bell hooks’s (1989) assertion that speech can be a radical form of resistance for the oppressed, especially women of color and those from marginalized communities.

Intertextually, *Two Words* draws from the tradition of magical realism, but with a feminist twist. Like Gabriel García Márquez’s use of the surreal to critique authoritarian regimes, Allende incorporates fantastical elements to expose social contradictions. However, while Márquez often places women in symbolic or peripheral roles, Allende centers a woman who controls the symbolic system itself—language. Wendy Faris (2004) identifies this subversion as a defining feature of feminist magical realism, where female characters possess mystical abilities not as fantasy but as metaphorical expressions of inner strength and social critique. The ambiguity surrounding the “two words” that Belisa gives the General is central to this magic: they remain unrevealed to the reader, emphasizing their emotional and symbolic power rather than literal content. This secrecy underscores the feminist principle that some knowledge—particularly that which emerges from intimate, embodied experience—is not reducible to rational explanation or public consumption.

Additionally, Allende’s protagonist serves as a meta-fictional figure, representing the woman writer herself. Debra Castillo (1994) reads Belisa as an allegory of the female author who navigates a world of male dominance by writing new realities into being. Her story is not merely a tale of survival but a narrative of authorship: she authors her own identity and rewrites the

General's fate. By inserting language into a space of violence, she transforms the narrative trajectory from one of conquest to one of reflection and potential redemption. This interpretation positions *Two Words* as a feminist statement on the ethics of storytelling and the radical potential of the written—and spoken—word.

Thus, Allende's story becomes a layered exploration of linguistic empowerment, gender identity, and resistance. Belisa Crepusculario's journey is not simply a personal emancipation, but a narrative that reimagines the power of language as inherently political, ethical, and transformative. Her presence in a patriarchal world dominated by violence and silence becomes an assertion of what feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) calls the "speaking subject"—a woman who refuses invisibility and instead articulates a reality where voice equals power. In this light, *Two Words* is more than a story—it is a feminist manifesto written in metaphor, myth, and metaphorical resistance, revealing how the soft power of words can disrupt the hard structures of domination.

### **Conclusion**

In *Two Words*, Isabel Allende constructs a narrative that is both deceptively simple and thematically profound, centering on the transformative power of language as a means of resistance and self-definition for women living under patriarchal systems. Through the figure of Belisa Crepusculario, Allende offers a compelling feminist portrait of a woman who subverts traditional power structures not by force, seduction, or compliance, but through the intellectual and emotional mastery of language. Belisa's journey from voiceless poverty to self-sufficient autonomy is emblematic of the broader feminist struggle to reclaim voice, space, and identity in a world that historically renders women silent or invisible.

The symbolic and practical functions of language in the story reflect key tenets of feminist literary and critical theory. By situating Belisa as both a narrator and an agent of change, Allende aligns her with the theoretical frameworks of Hélène Cixous and Judith Butler, who argue that identity—especially gendered identity—is formed, negotiated, and often resisted through discourse. Belisa's refusal to conform to socially constructed norms of femininity and her ability to influence the hypermasculine General mark her as a figure of subversion and possibility. Her two unnamed words, imbued with emotional power rather than rational clarity, underscore a feminist epistemology that privileges subjective, relational, and embodied knowledge over abstract, hierarchical forms of truth.

Moreover, Belisa's occupation as a word-seller reimagines both economic and narrative authority. In contrast to patriarchal economies that define women's value through their physical labor or reproductive roles, Allende's protagonist earns a living through intellectual and creative engagement. Her role challenges capitalist and gendered norms by demonstrating that knowledge, language, and empathy possess economic and social value. This gesture also reflects Silvia Federici's critique of the erasure of women's non-material contributions within both domestic and public spheres.

Set against a violent and masculine backdrop of civil conflict and authoritarianism, Belisa's quiet but potent use of language offers a counter-narrative to dominant ideologies of control. In doing so, *Two Words* affirms the political nature of storytelling and communication, a view shared by thinkers like Trinh T. Minh-ha, who insist that speech, especially when used by marginalized voices, becomes an act of resistance. Allende, therefore, does more than tell a story—she crafts a literary space in which language becomes liberation, where words, however small or mysterious, carry the power to reimagine not just personal destinies, but social orders.

Ultimately, this feminist reading of *Two Words* demonstrates that language is not merely a medium of expression, but a form of agency, survival, and transformation. In Belisa Crepusculario, Allende has created a character who embodies the essence of feminist resistance—one who writes her own narrative in a world that seeks to dictate it for her. Through language, she not only reclaims her voice but also reshapes the voices and lives of others, proving that even in the most oppressive of circumstances, words can be the most radical tools of freedom.

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