

# REVOLUTIONIZING AND REDISCOVERING WOMEN'S SPIRIT: A GYNOCRITICAL STUDY OF *THE HOUSE OF SPIRITS*

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## **Abstract**

The article looks into how *The House of Spirits* realistically depicts the life of Latin American women who despite the discriminatory attitudes of the patriarchal world stand firm and resolute to challenge the hegemony of the dominant patriarchal structures around them. It explores the very perspective of feminism by taking into account the non-patriarchal private as well as the patriarchal public life of women characters. The aim is to uncover how the author subverts patriarchal structures that portray the image of the Chilean women as fallible and subhuman creature. Since every action of women is contrary to the accepted norm, the paper traces the reaction of women towards the patriarchal mindset prevalent in Chile. The way women are shown in the perpetual quest of their feminine role results in the transformation of their lives and roles. As Gynocriticism rejects the male author for the representation of women's issues, it is the most suitable framework for such an analysis. Content analysis along with close-reading is used as a technique to interpret the text applying Showalter's Gynocritical theory. The present study is useful not only to understand women's condition in our highly patriarchal society but also suggests the ways to subvert it.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, feminism, *The House of Spirits*, gender rediscovery, Gynocriticism

## **Introduction**

Isabel Allende's *The House of Spirits* (1993) appears to be a historical document covering the social, political and domestic life of Latin American people. But a careful perusal of the text reveals another peculiar aspect of Chilean life i.e. the life of women sketched through the pen of a woman author. Allende covers most of the aspects of Chilean women including their role ascribed to them by the patriarchal society. The major aim of the paper is not only to trace and uncover the patriarchal designs to confine women within the four walls but also investigate the patriarchal strategies that further restrict their freedom of speech, action and the ways of thinking that if a woman tries to cross these boundaries she is penalized psychologically as well as physically. Our research extends even a step further to figure out how the compromised position of women in a patriarchal society has an ingrained

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potential to prove a catalyst of change to empower themselves in the society where they are highly marginalized.

The Latin American world is generally known for the land of revolutions and resistances challenging the status-co. The names of 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionaries such as Fidel Castro, Hugu Chavez and Ernesto Che Guevara are not unknown to those living in our age. Associating revolutions and different way of thinking with this part of the world makes it an entirely different than the so-called mainstream world such as Europe, the North America, Australia and the developed parts of Asia. The people of this part of the world are known to put severe resistance to the false notions, hegemonic ideologies and dictatorial regimes of the powerful and imperialist power such as the United States. This makes a strong case for Allende as being a Latino woman who is no exception to the revolutionaries referred to above. She seems to be charged with greater enthusiasm and power of resistance than the women of the advanced countries despite being doubly marginalized; the Latino women have an acute sense of dissatisfaction and discomfort with their conventional role in a patriarchal society.

#### ***Review of the Relevant Literature Review***

Since the very beginning of the literary history women have been at the centre of representation in literary works mostly by men. There is a vast plethora of works which cannot be reviewed here keeping in view the scope of this paper. There are many works which portray the issue of feminism positively such as Lucie Armit and L. Timmel Duchamp (1992) trace the genre of ghost stories composed by female authors as a medium to convey psychological problems of the individuals in a lighter and concealed way. They sum up that "women's ghost stories not only explore areas of concern different from those treated in the male tradition, but refuse the latter's inherent binary oppositions, taking the boundary between "natural" and "supernatural" as fluid rather than absolute." (Armit & Duchamp p. 849) They describe *Perils of the Night* (1990) as an interesting stuff for those interested in liberation of middle-class women from the social constraints of English society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, the perspective used here is not limited to Gothic literature which talks about feminism in a lighter and concealed way. Besides, Allende's novel is not entirely a

ghost story where she has taken up the feminist issue much more seriously, directly and intensively.

Magnarell's (1986) point of view that "The females who are not center stage as is Esteban, but who nonetheless make a significant contribution to the course of history. In fact, all the women of the family were creative; Rosa embroidered mythical creatures combined of disparate parts, and Blanca fashioned them of clay, just as Alba composes the text we read" (Magnarelli p. 102) supports the objectives of this study that is to underestimate the women is the false notion of patriarchal world.

Looking into the history of Latin American feminist issues, we see that they have very prominent role in the Latin American world. Sor Juana (1700s), for example, can certainly be considered as the torchbearer of women liberation. She put her vehement efforts for the recognition of equal rights for women in every perspective of life. She had been the champion of women's cause in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Latin American world at the time when the word "Feminism" was not even invented. It reflects that the perturbing sense of inequality had been felt long ago.

Reflecting on the status of women in Latin American world, Mexican poet Octavio Paz (1961) had stated that women are considered secretive and that they are considered creatures without sentiments and expression meant merely for carrying out the domestic chores. In his essays, he gives the point of view of patriarchal world towards women. This paper takes a contrary view for the eradication of such a patriarchal thought about women.

Sandra Cisneros (1994) the Mexican poetess and author, openly defines the role of women in society by condemning male-chauvinist society where women's role is no more than a sex toy. The poems in her *Loose Woman* reveal the same aspect of the humiliation and disgust the woman as 'macha' faces. Cisneros gives more space to the issue of sexual exploitation while this study also takes into consideration other aspects of the women's world.

### ***Methodology and Theoretical Framework***

We have used qualitative method of inquiry to conduct a feminist critique of the novelistic text with the help of Elaine Showalter's (1979) theory of Gynocriticism. Bell hooks' theory of feminism also supports

our point of view. For this purpose, first of all, the novel's text is viewed through the technique of Literary Close Reading. According to Cuddon (1997), Literary Close Reading entails a preliminary analysis of a literary work from a specific perspective. In this way, if I view *The House of Spirits* from a feminist perspective, it would mean that I'll select only the details of the novel's text which included explicit or implicit evidences of feminism and represent the whole novel by shortening or omitting the irrelevant details. In a later process, the selected textual and contextual examples would be put to a feminist analysis using the tools acquired through the reading of Showalter and hooks.

*The House of Spirits* gives space to the female character of the Trueba Family including all the aspects of their lives. It can be roughly called the story of four generations of women; Nievia, Clara, Blanca and Alba. Though Nievia's character is given very less space, yet, it reveals the very initial stage of the feminist movement i.e. women's fight for the suffrage rights. The last character, i.e. Alba, is much closer to the third wave of feminism dealing with the issue of sexuality and deconstructing the social structure. She appears broadminded, emotionally strong and advocate of pre-marital sexual relations. Blanca, Februela and Clara represent the middle generation and have been shown antagonizing, fighting, protesting against the physical and psychological violence created by Trueba as the head of the house. They are shown protesting for the basic rights related to their social and private lives. The second wave was also influenced by the Marxist and Socialist movements at that time. This is why, we find Clara, Blanca and Alba's great inclination towards liberalism as they secretly help the liberal and the poor of their society.

Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism is the strand of feminist theory which has been used to as a critical and theoretical perspective to analyze the entire work. Gynocriticism usually known for focusing on woman's fight for her individuality besides undoing the conception of socially 'constructed gender'. Gynocriticism not only focuses on the issues of gender but also recommends the deconstruction of women's 'internalized consciousness' in a patriarchal society. It aims at rediscovering women's 'subculture' and the exhibition of the female representation. *The House of Spirits* is produced by a female author to voice the female issue of identity and exploitation. Even the translator of this work, Magda Bogin,

is a woman. It covers all the aspects of Chilean women's life what they think, aspire and dream and also deals with the ways how they translate their dreams into reality - a reality which acknowledges them. The novel ends positively with the hope that the rigidity of the patriarchal world would lose its power against the spirit of women. When Clara goes to jail and loses her spirits she sees the vision of her mother who motivates her to contemplate and defend herself by writing. This incident reflects Showalter's idea of Gynocriticism, i.e., a kind of re-writing of patriarchal discourse in favor of women. In the conclusion of the story Alba rewrites her family history with the help of her grandmother's personal diary. This rewriting implies the rediscovery, revival of the life of women not as a marginalized group but as individuals.

### **Analysis**

#### ***Dissatisfaction with Socially Acknowledged Status***

The analysis of the text reveals that it is closely related to the struggle of the feminist movement of 1960s in Europe and the United States. There are two wars simultaneously going on - the clash between the status-quo (military) and the liberals, and the contention between the sexes. The former is mainly related to men and men relationship and ends in destruction, bloodshed for apparently no cause. While the latter is the fight for man and woman relationship where man resorts to violence but the woman resorts to plead for unity, sacrifice and compromise. Her ultimate aim is the stable blissful family life. It exhibits the writer's insight on the sensitivity of the issue of gender. The female world of her novel is shown as pacifist and truly the agent for change. The efforts of women for the triumph over the authority of patriarchy have been portrayed positively; "I would like to have been born a man, so I could leave too" she said, full of hatred. "And I would not have liked to be a woman", he said. (Bogin Chapter 2 Paragraph19 hitherto referred in a style 2.19)

The above exchange of dialogue takes place between Esteban and his sister. Both are brought up in the same environment but with different designs which structure their minds and personalities differently. She restricts herself to the responsibility of domestic chores and feels her life more like a prison. We can feel a sense of complaint in her tone and also a sense of detest of Sebastian towards the role of women.

***Women, The Unusual Kind of Creatures***

The author intentionally portrays women with the exceptionally high qualities like intuition, mystic feelings and creativity. The pregnancy of the woman characters symbolically reflects the unusual kind women traits, i.e., their sense of creativity and productivity. It reveals that women are not at all inferior to men. Rather they are born with unusual sensibility and have divine power of intuition and wisdom. Their ability of foretelling the future is not associated with men. It is Clara, a woman, in whom this trait is reflected. All the female characters have been steadfastly engaged for the cause of woman liberation. They refute the patriarchal notion that relates women to inferiority and frailty. The notion of underestimating the women is related all parts of the world, i.e., Europe, Asia or Latin America. Clara, Blanca and Alba successfully trample the so-called notion of patriarchal world.

***Agent of Change***

The most surprising trait of the women of Trueba family is their resistance and silent confrontation within their confined and limited place which results in change. Clara is beaten violently many times especially over the matter of Blanca's love affair. Blanca protests and Clara shows her unwillingness to accept her husband's dominance by confining herself in isolation. She does not let him come closer despite the fact that he wished for her touch.

Febreula, Esteban's sister, boycotts her brother by refusing all kind of financial help from him after her expulsion from home which indicates that Allende's women world is full of self respect and self esteem. They are no doubt strong women who could be destroyed but cannot be defeated as they would not compromise on their structured fate. They take over their own control in their own hands. Esteban cannot stand his male chauvinism further and finally loses the battle of power over the female spirits of the house.

Clara, like a snail, camouflages herself in the shell of silence whereas this silence is not taken as a passive activity. In her silence, she indulged herself in self-created world which is far from the restrictions of her authoritative husband. Clara manages to get connected with the exterior world. She inherits this tendency from her mother Nivea, who was a woman of unyielding character and strong will. Nivea used to take part in the feminist cause more openly than Clara. On the other hand

Clara's struggle is not an open encounter instead she adopts the way of silence. Neither she leaves her house nor applies any kind of physical force to show resistance. She adopts the way of ignoring and neglecting Trueba. Despite the confinement and restricted environment, such a way of neglect is a big blow to the ego of male-chauvinists like Trueba for whom the status of woman is not less than a puppet which is structured and maneuvered with subservient nature. In this way, she gets escape and revives herself in a better way to face him:

Clara's response to his physical violence was twofold. First, she refused to speak him and then, she locked herself in her room. Clara's denial of access to the space of her room, of her body - the spaces which Trueba had violated - was a powerful weapon. Even more potent was her refusal to allow Trueba to enter her mental space; she would never verbally communicate with him again. (García-Johnson p. 191)

Clara's help for the poor, marginalized and needy reflects her desire to liberate herself too from being marginalized by the patriarchy. It also exhibits her liberation, revolution of her spirit and strength of her character which she fully utilizes despite her limitations.

The women are shown very daring rejecting the conventions set by the patriarchal world. Blanca appears non-conformist by involving in her love for the son of a peasant, Pedro Tercero Garcia. That is against the conventions and ideals of her father. So is the case with Alba who goes against the wishes of Trueba and gets involved in Miguel, a radical leftist. Trueba wants to maintain his control over the women. Not only on the women of his house but also of the peasants' women. He sexually exploits them and spoils the life of the virgin peasants. For sexual pleasure he is ready to get closer to the daughter of his worker but when the time approaches for making her offspring a legal heir, he refuses to accept that child just because of the reason that it is not from the woman of his own clan. For him this child is an outcast and subhuman despite the fact that he is the cause of his arrival in the world.

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. At the rate they're going, the next thing you know they'll be asking to be deputies judge-even President of the Republic! (Bogin 2.77)

Esteban's remarks are full of biases of male dominating society, underestimating women:

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 real man... Besides, she was born with a wound between her legs and without balls, right, Senora Clara?... (ibid 4.3)

In that respect women are really they thick. They're the daughters of rigidity. They need a man to feel secure but they don't realize that the one thing they should be afraid of is men. They don't know how to run their lives. They have to sacrifice their lives for the sake of someone else... Whores are the worst *patron*, believe me. They throw life their lives away working for some pimp, smile when he beats them... and when he goes off and takes up with a woman half of their age they forgive him everything. Because 'he's a man.' No, sir, I'm not like that. No one's ever support me and that's why you'll never find me supporting someone else... (ibid 4.41)

But he was determined that at least his son would be kept at safe distance from her magic ,so Jaime and Nicolas were sent to a Victorian English boarding school. Blanca's case was different matter because her father believed that her destiny was marriage and a brilliant life in society where the ability to converse with the dead, if kept on a frivolous level, could be an asset. (ibid 4.94)

### ***Rediscovery and Transformation***

The women of Trueba family, i.e., Clara, Blanca and Alba are able to succeed in influencing Esteban Trueba. They prove their worth through an unyielding courage and show the world that to underestimate the status of women is a false conception. They are not in any way lesser than the men of the society. Ultimately Esteban admits the fact to some extent. And he senses the fact that it is impossible to control the women who are self-enlightened. He has been fully controlling the women of his house either through violence or restrictions. He used to consider them irrational creatures that do not have even commonsense. He gets lenient toward Alba and does not show any resentment. But we see that Patriarchy has so strongly intervened in the mindset of a society that one cannot completely get out of it. Despite the fact that Trueba gets



transformed but it is not a complete transformation because he still feels that much of woman's future prospects depend on her selection of husband:

He had finally come to accept - beaten into it by the tide of his own ideas - that not all women were complete idiot, and he believed that Alba ,who was too plain to attract a well-to-do husband, could enter one of the professions and make her living like a man. (Bogin 10.25)

He further reveals the fact of patriarchal world in these words and takes the side of a woman's world who loses her liberty, and independence through wedlock; "He said it was good for men to have a wife, but that women Alba could only lose by marrying." (Bogin 11.2)

### **Conclusion**

The issue of feminism is a very prominent feature of Latin American world. Allende's depiction of the female characters is very thought-provoking. The way she deals with the issue of feminism exhibits her insight into the sensitivity of gender. The female world of her novel has been shown as the pacifist but true agent for the change. The effort of the woman for the triumph over the patriarchal authority is portrayed positively. Her female characters fight for their rights without shedding blood; they create a space for themselves without leaving the confined space. Allende does not dislocate her female characters. She does not portray them escaping from the situation like Ibsen's Nora who has to leave her own home for her rights. On the contrary, Allende's women have stronger nerves and great flexibility. They fight back for their rights from the same ground and create space for themselves. Since the writer is a woman herself, she can easily identify herself with the protagonist as to how the latter can use herself as an agent of change in the acutely patriarchal society. Had the writer been a male, he could not have represented the true feelings and the strengths of women with which they use to empower themselves.

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