

Karen Boush

Eng 268: Reading/Writing Texts

Prof. Cheesewright

December 6, 2007

From Forgiveness to Freedom: The Empowerment of Female Protagonists in Isabel Allende's Novels

Since publishing her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, in 1982, Chilean author Isabel Allende has become the most widely read Latin American woman writer in the world (Cox 13). Her novels, often multigenerational family sagas that take place in the Americas against backdrops of 19th- and 20th-century political instabilities and social inequities, give an authentic voice to women and others who have been marginalized or outright silenced in the traditional Western literary canon. In this paper, I suggest that Allende's female protagonists are empowered in three distinct ways: they are strong-minded individuals; they have special, creative talents; and they enter into unsanctioned roles and relationships. To support my argument, I draw on my analysis of three of Allende's novels—*The House of the Spirits*, *Daughter of Fortune* (1999), and *Zorro* (2005)—as well as on the work of several other critics. I conclude by suggesting that the empowerment of Allende's female characters is either assisted or hindered by the cultural forces in these women's lives, and that by creating complex female characters Allende has succeeded in giving voice to other marginalized groups in colonial and postcolonial societies.

Allende's work has been both praised and criticized by literary critics. When *Daughter of Fortune* was published, Sophia McClennen gave Allende a mixed review:

“Her trademark style of a popularized magical realism combined with predominantly female characters has made her narratives accessible and entertaining to a wide public. Yet it is precisely the qualities that draw her work to a broad audience that also, arguably, mark her narrative style as a simplified version of the work of such literary legends as Gabriel García Márquez or José Donoso” (184). Acknowledging that Allende’s novels “are often criticized for sentimentality, social and political naivety [sic], stylistic conservatism and, in general, for the perpetuation of bourgeois norms,” Philip Swanson suggests that critics underestimate the power of the popular narrative. He writes, “Allende’s mobilization of popular formats can be seen to [communicate] key values and ideas to a mass public in the way that academic theory or more complex examples of Latin American fiction could not hope to” (265).

Regardless of accusations made against her work, Allende holds a firm place in literary history as a main contributor to the Latin American feminist literary awakening in the 1980s. Prior to publication of *The House of the Spirits*, male writers offering only traditional, masculine perspectives dominated Latin American literature. Jean Franco offers a harsh assessment of the stereotypical portrayal of women during that literary period:

Even the great historical novels of contemporary Latin America—*Terra Nostra* by Carlos Fuentes, *The War of the End of the World* by Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Supreme I* by Roa Bastos, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel García Márquez ... take as given the contrast between male (activity and enterprise) and female (passivity and reproduction). These novels are such efficient machines that we forget that there isn’t an

intelligent woman in any of them or that the most common form of male and female intercourse is rape. (105)

Set in Chile from the 1920s until the 1970s, when the right-wing military overthrew President Salvador Allende (the author's uncle), *The House of Spirits* marked a milestone in Latin American literature by tracing that nation's postcolonial history through the female lineage of a powerful, fictional Chilean family. All three of the main characters—Clara del Valle Trueba; her daughter, Blanca; and her granddaughter, Alba—experience horrible acts of violence, including torture and rape, perpetrated against them by men in their own family. After *The House of the Spirits*, Allende went on to write several more novels in which the protagonists are women who stand up to the men in their lives and reject their destiny as defined for them by the repressive Latin American patriarchy (some more successfully than others). By providing new, positive images of Latin American women, Allende undeniably shifted the assumptions and priorities of existing literary debates.

My analysis of Allende's novels indicates that she empowers her women protagonists in at least three distinct ways. First, they are always strong-minded and morally strong individuals. In *The House of the Spirits*, for example, Clara, Blanca, and Alba are all financially dependent on the head of the family (and Clara's husband), Esteban Trueba, but they refuse to be dominated by him. Set a century earlier but once again in Chile, *Daughter of Fortune* also features strong-willed, upper-class women who make their marks in the world. Eliana Rivero writes of the protagonist, Eliza Sommers, and her adoptive mother, Miss Rose Sommers, that "they proved themselves to be as passionate, creative and daring as few females could in the confines of the nineteenth

century English and Chilean societies in which they were born and raised” (92). In both these novels, even female characters at the opposite end of the social scale—that is, the women running the brothels—achieve high levels of prestige because of their strength of character. In *The House of the Spirits*, Transito Soto, after 50 years in the city, can pull the political strings necessary to help Esteban find out where Alba is imprisoned and secure her release. In *Daughter of Fortune*, Joe Bonecrusher, a tough woman “with a motherly heart” who manages a caravan of traveling prostitutes, insists on nursing a mining town through an epidemic of dysentery and in doing so earns the respect of even the miners’ wives.

In *Zorro*, the character Isabel de Romeu falls hopelessly in love with Zorro at age 12, but she, too, develops and maintains her own identity. (At first, *Zorro* might seem to deviate from Allende’s other novels in that its primary protagonist is a male (Zorro himself), but by the novel’s end it becomes apparent that the character Isabel, whose identity as narrator is not revealed until the final chapters, is a woman who in hindsight can be considered another major protagonist.) As Isabel de Romeu matures into middle age, her love for Zorro remains unrequited, yet she exhibits a remarkable ability to keep from slipping into depression because of it. Some might call her character unrealistic in that sense; others might call her character ahead of the times. Either way, Isabel de Romeu’s sense of self remains unquestionably strong.

Second, Allende empowers her female protagonists by giving them creative, sometimes supernatural talents. Clara, in *The House of the Spirits*, is a clairvoyant, who as Cox explains “can predict deaths and earthquakes, decipher the meaning of dreams, and move the saltcellar across the table with her mind” (16). Clara’s supernatural abilities

play a prominent role in this novel, and when the book was initially published Allende was accused of mimicking Gabriel García Márquez's use of magical realism in his masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Márquez certainly popularized magical realism—a literary style in which strange, unrealistic events are narrated as though they were common, everyday occurrences—but Ruth Jenkins argues that Allende uses the supernatural very differently than Márquez does. Jenkins explains that by using it to explore “the tension between ... authentic experience and that constructed for a patriarchal ideology, folklore and sanctioned history,” Allende challenges “privileged Eurocentric realism” (62). Jenkins further explains, “In ... Allende's narratives, the supernatural is closely linked to female voice ... ghosts and spirits provide authority for articulation and identity. Significantly, such authority—especially where the supernatural is incorporated into cultural beliefs and experience—proves a genuine challenge to patriarchal authority” (69).

After *The House of the Spirits*, Allende decreases her use of magical realism as a means of empowering women characters, although it is always present in one form or another in all her novels. Still, she continues to give her female protagonists special talents that sometimes border on the surreal but always give them an edge in male-dominated societies. Consider the first line of *Daughter of Fortune*: “Everyone is born with some special talent, and Eliza Sommers discovered early on that she had two: A good sense of smell and a good memory” (3). Eventually, Eliza's finely tuned olfactory abilities help her to develop into an extraordinary cook. Having left Chile and made her way to Alta California in search of her lover, Joaquín, she makes a living first by selling *empanadas* in mining camps and later by running a pastry shop in San Francisco. Her

sense of smell also helps her to judge people accurately. At one point, she can “smell evil” on a stranger who she later learns is wanted for murder. In addition, Eliza’s adoptive mother, Miss Rose, supports herself by secretly writing and selling pornographic novels inspired by her own love affair as a young woman with a Viennese opera singer. Eliza’s friend, Paulina del Valle, is an astute businesswoman whose husband has learned through experience “not to disdain his wife’s financial premonitions” (123).

In *Zorro*, Isabel de Romeu’s talent lies with her ink pen. She spins wonderful tales, including Zorro’s biography, in which she hides herself in the narrative shadows. In fact, writing is a creative talent of many of Allende’s female characters. As Maria Roof observes, “In resistance to the attraction of accepting socially circumscribed roles for women, Allende’s works offer the significant symbol of the woman as writer” (406). Whether a psychic, cook, or author, all Allende’s female characters develop, and gain strength from, their own, personal talents. As Eliana Rivero writes, “They are all, in a sense, artists with their hands, their wits, their words; but each modifies the pattern of creativity and generates her own form of representation” (103). Having acknowledged in a 1999 interview that women throughout history have been denied recognition for their own ideas (Skafidas 24), Allende makes creativity an integral component of all her female protagonists.

Third, Allende empowers her female protagonists by having them reject socially defined norms of behavior and morality, whether by disguising themselves as males or entering into forbidden relationships. In *Daughter of Fortune*, Eliza, upon arriving in San Francisco in the 1850s at the height of the California Gold Rush, dresses as a deaf-mute

Chinese boy to protect herself from aggressive men. Right away, she feels different: “The man’s clothing gave her an unfamiliar freedom; she had never felt so invisible” (222). Eliza eventually falls in love with Tao Chi’en, a Chinese doctor who has been her best friend since she ran away from home as a pregnant, unwed teenager, yet it takes the couple years to admit and gain the confidence to act on their attraction for one another. Thinking back, Eliza realizes that “at the time loving someone of another race seemed impossible; they believed there was no place for a couple like them anywhere in the world” (242). Similarly, in *The House of the Spirits*, Blanca loves a man of a different race and in a lower class. Esteban forbids her from seeing Pedro, a revolutionary Indian working on the family hacienda, but she defies her father by refusing to take part in an arranged marriage and constantly steals away at night to see Pedro. In *Zorro*, Isabel de Romeu joins in the fight for justice by masquerading as Zorro and expertly brandishing a sword to defend mestizos against unfair treatment by the Spanish aristocracy. At one point, she saves Zorro himself from death at the hands of his archrival.

Although Allende’s female protagonists share these three similar characteristics, some of these women flourish as individuals more than others. While the Trueba women in *The House of the Spirits* are focused on simply surviving the hard-handed tactics of Esteban at home and the brutal military regime in Santiago, Eliza and Isabel de Romeu, in *Daughter of Fortune* and *Zorro*, respectively, find California to be a “land of opportunity,” where they are relatively free to fail or succeed on their own accord (232). In other words, while the Trueba women are learning to forgive, Eliza and Isabel de Romeu are learning to be free.

Allende's novels indicate that women in 19th-century colonial California perhaps had more leeway to grow as individuals and to govern their own destinies than women in 20th-century Chile did, reflecting the sometimes nearly impenetrable walls that cultural forces can build around women's lives. Allende's comments in the 1999 interview call attention to the huge gap she sees as existing between Latin American and American cultures:

[The U.S.] is a very individualistic country whose only real value is to be self-made. In my culture, it's not a virtue to be self-made; the virtue is to belong to something—community, tribe, village, family. (Skafidas 23)

Allende's characters are, in a sense, simply living out their destinies as their cultures demand. That is, in Chile, it is expected for individuals to be loyal to their families and communities, no matter what. In America, it's expected for individuals to forge their own identities, no matter what.

Furthermore, Roof suggests that, in addition to fighting the patriarchal values and norms entrenched in the postcolonial Chilean society surrounding them, the female characters in *The House of the Spirits* also must fight their own, internalized views of inferiority. Roof applies W.E.B. Du Bois's "double consciousness" among blacks in America during the late 1800s to women in postcolonial societies, who have internalized patriarchal views of themselves: "Especially apparent in the female characters in [*The House of the Spirits*] is the sense described by Du Bois of one's definition and judgment by the Other's standards, 'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (404). The improbability of immediate social change might explain Allende's

liberal use of magical realism in this novel. To give women any power at all, Allende had to create a different world, a supernatural world, in which to do it. In contrast, in *Daughter of Fortune* and *Zorro*, the protagonists can physically leave the strictly patriarchal societies in which they grew up (Eliza leaves Chile, while Isabel de Romeu leaves Spain) and hence find it easier to overcome any internalized sense of inferiority. Allende doesn't need to rely on magical realism to empower them.

In Eliza's case, she not only rejects traditional patriarchal values but also embraces many different cultures and experiences, allowing her to give voice to what Ania Loomba refers to as a "multiplicity of narratives." In her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Loomba considers whether the voices of subalterns (repressed, marginalized groups) can be recovered in postcolonial literature. She disagrees with theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who suggested in his 1985 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that it is impossible (233). While cautioning against creating a romanticized or homogeneous view of subalterns, Loomba asserts that authors, in order to uncover the consciousness of women or of any other subaltern, must avoid setting up a dichotomy between colonizers and colonized and instead consider the "different forces and discourses" that led subalterns to rebel against the colonizers and challenge existing power dynamics (240). "In order to listen for subaltern voices we need to uncover the multiplicity of narratives that were hidden by the grand narratives ... and think about how the former are woven together," she states (241).

In *Daughter of Fortune*, Allende does just that by creating Eliza—a character of great intelligence, imagination, and empathy—and following her adventures from postcolonial Chile to colonial California. Eliza herself is of mixed race, the result of a

casual affair between a native Chilean woman and a British sea captain. Raised by her Victorian spinster aunt, Miss Rose, in the British colony of Valparaíso, Chile, Eliza is equally influenced by Mama Fresia, the family cook and housekeeper and the “second pillar” of her childhood (12). Mama Fresia teaches Eliza about “Indian legends and myths, how to read signs of the animals and the sea, how to recognize the baits of the spirits, and the messages in dreams, and also how to cook” (12). Once Eliza arrives in California, her encounters with Mexican miners, Chinese prostitutes, gypsy tribes, and Native American peasants provide the multiple perspectives that Loomba states are required to challenge critics such as Spivak and, more importantly, rewrite history.

In conclusion, although Allende’s novels sometimes balance precariously between romance and realism, her characters, especially her female protagonists, carry an authenticity that continually draws readers to devour her novels. A close analysis of Allende’s work indicates that many of her protagonists, even those living in Latin American colonial and postcolonial societies with strict patriarchal values, share certain, empowering characteristics. While these individual attributes fill each protagonist with possibility, each woman operates within a cultural framework that very clearly affects her ability to become fully empowered. Given Allende’s successful track record in providing new, positive images of Latin American women who lived in colonial and postcolonial worlds, she can be depended on to continue to make an impact on mainstream and academic audiences alike.

Works Cited

- Allende, Isabel. *Daughter of Fortune*. Margaret Savers Peden, tr. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 1999.
- Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits*. Magda Bogin, tr. New York: Bantam. 1986.
- Allende, Isabel. *Zorro*. Margaret Savers Peden, tr. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 2005.
- Cox, Karen Castellucci. *Isabel Allende: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 2003.
- Franco, Jean. "Self-Destructing Heroines." *Minnesota Review* 22 (1984): 105-115.
- "Isabel Allende." Postcolonial Studies at Emory University web site. Authored by Helaena White. Accessed November 11, 2007 at <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Allende.html>.
- Jenkins, Ruth Y. "Authorizing Female Voice and Experience: Ghosts and Spirits in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Allende's *The House of the Spirits*." *MELUS* (Fall 1994). Accessed November 11, 2007 at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2278/is_n3_v19/ai_18583120

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London, New York: Routledge. 1998.

McClennen, Sophia A. Book review of *Daughter of Fortune*. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 21:2 (2000): 184-5.

Rivero, Eliana. "Of Trilogies and Genealogies: *Daughter of Fortune* and *Portrait in Sepia*." *Latin American Literary Review* 30.60 (2002): 91-111.

Roof, Maria. "W. E. B. Du Bois, Isabel Allende, and the Empowerment of Third World Women." *CLA Journal* 39.4 (1996): 401-416.

Skafidas, Michael. "Pinochet's Ghost." *NPQ: New Perspectives Quarterly* 16:3 (1999): 22-6.

Swanson, Philip. "Z/Z: Isabel Allende and the Mark of Zorro." *Romance Studies* 24.3 (2006): 265-277.