

Exploring Repression, Resistance and Resilience in *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende

Dr. P. Sarojini

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sona College of Arts and Science

Salem (Tamil Nadu), India

psarojini1984@gmail.com

Abstract

Repression hinders individuals from realizing and enjoying freedom at familial, social, and political levels. It is often exercised by individuals or groups through violent means such as assassination, torture, and other forms of coercion. Resistance refers to the act or power of opposing repression, while resilience denotes the psychological capacity to recover swiftly from grief, adversity, or disaster. In human society, relationships of dependence—such as children on parents or citizens on governments—are inevitable; however, such dependents are not always treated equally. Many suffer repression, oppression, and subjugation in diverse ways and intensities. Literature, with its dual responsibility to instruct and to delight, often mirrors these realities. Through literary characters, readers learn strategies of resistance against life's barriers and the strength of resilience in adversity. Since life is an interweaving of success and failure, the refusal to acknowledge failure can become a major obstacle to growth, causing individuals to repeat mistakes rather than learn from them. Writers, through their art, illuminate such truths and impart lessons of survival and transformation. This paper examines three forms of repression as depicted in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, analyzing both their causes and consequences, while also highlighting how characters employ resistance and resilience to overcome repression.

Keywords: Repression, resistance, resilience, barriers, oppression, subjugation

In Isabel Allende's novel *The House of the Spirits*, the primary victims of repression include peasants, Pedro Tercero, Pancha Gracia, Pedro Segundo, Clara, Alba, and Blanca. Allende depicts repression operating on three interconnected levels: familial, social, and political. To analyze these dynamics, this study applies the Matrix of Domination theory, which explains how individuals or groups become victims of systemic repression. The theory examines the attributes and practices of those who dominate, showing how superiority complexes lead individuals to repress others on the basis of race, class, sex, religion, language, or age.

Patricia Hill Collins originally proposed this framework in her influential work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, where she highlights the interlocking nature of oppression. By employing this theoretical lens, the present paper seeks to demonstrate how Allende's characters embody the lived realities of repression and how such domination shapes their struggles for survival and empowerment.

As the term implies, there are many different ways one might experience domination, facing many different challenges in which one obstacle, such as race, may overlap with other sociological features. Such things as race, age, and sex, may affect an individual in extremely different ways, in such simple cases as varying geography, socioeconomic status, or simply throughout time. Many feminist authors have contributed a great deal of research toward the understanding and application of domination models in many realms of society. (Collins)

In *The House of the Spirits*, Esteban Trueba exerts domination over his wife, daughter, granddaughter, peasants, and the workers under his authority. Though he encounters many adversities in life, these challenges intensify his belief in his own superiority, leading him to mistreat those who are powerless. Within the familial sphere, such repression forces Esteban's daughter, Blanca to lose her lover and compels her into an arranged marriage. Both Clara and Blanca experience repression at the hands of Esteban under the weight of patriarchal authority. Denied the freedom to make their own choices, they are forced to comply with his commands and endure the consequences of his dominance.

The marital relationship between Esteban and Clara is marked by tragedy. Although Esteban harbours a profound love for Clara, his violent temper renders that love destructive and ultimately meaningless. For Clara, his affection becomes more of a distraction than a source of comfort. Esteban's rage, obsession, and instability are particularly evident after the death of Rosa, when his grief intensifies his possessive tendencies. What begins as admiration for Clara soon escalates into controlling obsession, as he seeks to restrict her both physically and emotionally. His repression and mistreatment of Clara reach an extreme when, in a fit of uncontrollable anger, he strikes her with such violence that he knocks out her front teeth. This shocking act epitomizes the devastating consequences of his patriarchal authority and abusive behaviour.

He lost control and struck her in the face, knocking her against the wall. Clara fell to the floor without a sound. Esteban seemed to awaken from the trance. He knelt by her side, crying and begging her forgiveness, trying to explain, calling her by all the special names....Finally, Clara opened her eyes. Blood was flowing from her nose. When she opened her mouth, she spat out several teeth, which fell to the floor, and a thread of bloody saliva trickled down her chin and neck. (THS 233-234)

After her forced marriage, Blanca eventually breaks free from the familial bonds imposed upon her and reclaims her autonomy. Despite Esteban's attempts to sever her relationship with Pedro Tercero, she continues to meet her lover and chooses to share her life with him. Although Pedro initially endures Esteban's cruelty and violence, both he and Blanca ultimately achieve freedom through their revolutionary ideals and determination. Alba, too, becomes a victim of familial repression, though her suffering takes a different form. Unlike Blanca, her oppression is not directly tied to her father but emerges through Esteban García, who uses her as an instrument of revenge. Alba is brutally raped and beaten repeatedly by Esteban García, which drives her to the brink of despair and even suicide. However, at her lowest moment, the spirit of Clara appears to her, urging her to endure and to bear witness. Inspired by Clara's guidance, Alba finds the strength to survive and begins to write about the injustices and struggles afflicting her country, transforming her trauma into an act of resistance and resilience.

Alba eventually rises above her frustration and confronts the torture inflicted upon her by Esteban García with remarkable courage. In most cases, familial repression cannot be resolved by external intervention; rather, the victims themselves must develop the strength and confidence to overcome it. In the novel, Alba succeeds in her struggle for liberation from repression, demonstrating resilience in the face of brutality. In contrast, Esteban García chooses the path of vengeance, which only perpetuates his own sense of captivity and bitterness. His actions fail to grant him freedom, while Alba's intellectual maturity and education empower her to transcend her suffering. Through knowledge and critical awareness, she transforms repression into resilience, ultimately attaining freedom not through violence but through inner strength and wisdom.

The novel also highlights the harsh realities faced by the lower-class population in Latin America, exposing the social and economic inequalities that shape their lives. The upper-class characters, in contrast, exemplify the abuses and privileges of the aristocracy. In many Latin American societies, lower-class youth often join the army or police force as a means of contributing to society while earning a stable income to support their families. Such employment is frequently one of the few viable options available to them. *The House of the Spirits* demonstrates how rigid class divisions create conditions for systemic repression, fostering discrimination and perpetuating social prejudice. Through these portrayals, Allende underscores the ways in which social hierarchies marginalize the powerless and maintain the dominance of the elite.

The lower-class people endeavour to promote their standard of living and try to bring social changes in their society. But most of them struggle to meet their vital requirements like food and shelter and this makes them show less interest in the social change. *The House of the Spirits* is a story of class struggle. The white, elite people control the politics, trade, and the standard of peasants. The lower class characters revolt against their oppressive class structure directly and indirectly. Social repression can be defined as, "Social repression is the act of controlling, subduing or suppressing people, groups and larger social aggregations by

interpersonal means. Techniques include information control, eliminating reform movements and manipulating local leaders” (Pam).

Conflicts arise between the upper and lower classes because the former owns the agricultural land while the latter labours tirelessly on it. In rural areas like Tres Marías, the upper class exerts complete control, overseeing essential infrastructure such as schools, churches, transportation, banks, and hospitals. While the upper class enjoys prosperity and comfort, the lower class often struggles to secure even their daily meals. This stark inequality fuels frustration among the lower class, prompting them to resist and strive for social equality.

In *The House of the Spirits*, Pedro Tercero embodies social repression and resistance. He is the son of Pedro Segundo, the lover of Blanca—who is the daughter of Esteban Trueba—and the biological father of Alba. Raised as a peasant in Tres Marías, Pedro falls in love with Blanca and is deeply influenced by the stories of his grandfather, which emphasize freedom and egalitarianism. He becomes friends with Jaime, Blanca’s brother, and together they discuss socialism and class struggle. Under the guidance of Father José, Pedro learns to play the guitar, and through his music, he composes revolutionary songs that spread the ideas of socialism throughout Tres Marías. His courage to challenge Esteban Trueba’s authority and his dedication to social justice marks him as a key figure representing resistance against oppression.

Esteban banishes Pedro Tercero from his estate after discovering that he distributes rebellious pamphlets among the peasants. However, he remains unaware that the songs sung by the peasants are also written by Pedro, through which he spreads his socialist ideas. Esteban’s fury intensifies when he learns of Pedro’s love affair with Blanca. In his anger, he hunts Pedro down, violently attacks him, and slices off three of his fingers. Through this act of brutality, Esteban demonstrates his oppressive and violent behaviour toward the lower-class peasants, particularly Pedro, as reflected in the following lines:

At the very last second he raised his arms to stop the axe and the edge of the tool sliced off three fingers of his right hand. The force of the blow thrusts me forward and I fell on my knees. . . The Child Esteban Garcia is by my side, staring at me silently. He has picked up the sliced-off fingers and is holding them like a bouquet of bloody asparagus. I couldn’t keep from retching then. My mouth filled with saliva, and I vomited all over my boots while the boy smiled impassively. ‘Drop that, you filthy brat!’ I shouted striking him in the hand. The fingers fell onto the sawdust, staining it red. (THS 240)

The quotation above highlights Esteban’s brutal and oppressive nature. He refuses to allow a lower-class peasant like Pedro Tercero to marry his daughter, Blanca, showing how rigid social status acts as a major obstacle in their lives. This social repression keeps the lower-class community living under conditions akin to slavery. Pedro serves as a prime example of rebellion, achieving freedom through his relentless defiance. Despite losing his fingers, he

persists with courage and determination, continually resisting the government and cruel upper-class figures like Esteban. By the end of the novel, Pedro ultimately attains freedom from Esteban's control. Interestingly, the once-brutal aristocrat Esteban facilitates the couple's escape to Canada, enabling Blanca and Pedro to be together.

After the presidential election, Pedro Tercero works for the newly established government. Born into the peasant class, he dedicates his life to the pursuit of equality, aiming to spread the principles of socialism and Marxism among the people through nonviolent means. He advocates for social justice using both music and legal measures. In contrast, social repression is vividly illustrated through Esteban Trueba's behavior toward the women on his estate. He is brutally violent toward women and shows no remorse for his actions, as no one dares to challenge his authority. Esteban exploits and sleeps with any girl he desires, fathering numerous illegitimate children, none of whom are allowed to carry his surname, except for Pedro's sister, Pancha García, who becomes his first victim. Esteban's repeated assaults on the daughters of lower-class peasants force families to hide their daughters from his predatory gaze. This oppression is made evident through the following lines:

Not a girl passed from puberty to adulthood that he did not subject to the woods, the riverbank, or the wrought-iron bed. When there are no more available women in Tres Marias, he began to chase after those from the neighbouring haciendas taking them in the wink of an eye anywhere he could find a place in the fields, usually at dusk. He did not bother to hide, because he is afraid of no one. On a few occasions, a brother, father, husband or employer showed up at Tres Marias to call him to account, but faced with his uncontrolled violence, these visits in the name of justice or revenge become less frequent. Word of his cruelty spread throughout the region, provoking jealous admiration among them of his class. The Peasants hid their daughters and clenched their fists helplessly is stronger, and he has impunity. (*THS* 81)

In *The House of the Spirits*, Esteban Trueba embodies violence and cruelty, yet female characters like Clara, Blanca, and Alba possess a constructive and connective power that allows knowledge, memory, and resilience to be transmitted across generations. Violence against women—including murder, rape, and torture—perpetuates cycles of aggression, as seen in how Esteban's brutal behavior affects Pancha García and other victims. This cycle of oppression ultimately impacts Esteban's granddaughter, Alba, yet her capacity for forgiveness enables both her family and society to confront and resolve these injustices. Standpoint theory demonstrates that an individual's willpower and perspective empower them to confront and resist various forms of repression. This theory can be applied to the female characters, who experience oppression on three levels—social, familial, and political. As noted by Sandra Harding, Harrington, and other theorists in the *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Standpoint theory emphasizes how marginalized perspectives provide unique insights and the potential for transformative resistance.

Standpoint epistemology is a methodology and a political strategy that address the problem of what is true in a way that aims to validate the knowledge of oppressed groups. 'Standpoint' refers to a shared social 'position' that is shaped by divisions of labour and structures of power. Standpoint epistemology claims that knowledge arising from the social locations of the exploited and oppressed has an authority that is less partial, more critically, powerful, and potentially transformative. (590)

The House of the Spirits realistically illustrates the political background of Chile around 1973. In that particular year, the Socialist President Salvador Allende was removed from the power. Politics is the second major theme of the novel, which begins from the second chapter. Political repression can be defined as, "Political repression consists of government action which grossly discriminates against persons or organizations viewed as presenting a fundamental challenge to existing power relationships or key governmental policies, because of their perceived political beliefs"(Goldstein xvi). *In the novel initially, the concept of politics appears very calm and smooth but ends with a political uproar.* Rosa the eldest daughter of Severo Del Valle's family is the first victim of the political adversaries. Though it is accidental, Rosa's death proves the political suppression and its great impact. The opposite political party of Severo Del Valley plans to eliminate him from the political field so they try to murder him. But Rosa accidentally consumes the poison. The autopsy of Rosa which is conducted in a secret way shows the power of politics and it is declared that she has committed suicide.

The discontented lives of the peasants are reflected in the novel. The working-class citizens need social justice and equality and this concept is spread across the country by some revolutionists like Pedro. Allende illustrates the strife and struggles faced by the lower classes in Latin America and project the fact that the political corruption is the major source for the society's injustices. The politicians and the dictators try to maintain their wealth and power and at the same time, they are stubborn that the lower classes should be in poverty. During elections, the landowners, including Esteban force the lower class people to vote for the conservative candidates. The powerful landlords state that if the peasants violate their orders and act against them, they would fire the peasants. On the other hand, if they elect their conservative candidates, they would offer reward to the peasants.

The members of the aristocracy give bribe to the police for handling the ballot boxes, and transportation during the election time. Thus, the lower class people could not find a perfect way to reshape their lives. Politically, they are suppressed and their standard of living reflects the colonial era. They are not paid properly, but people fear to raise their voice against this repressive attitude. Latin American people lived this kind of repressed life more than two decades during the rule of Pinochet. The politicians treat their working class people as their slaves and extract all sorts of advantages from them. The most three powers in Latin America: the Catholic Church, the Military, and businessmen, make the possible changes in the politics. Giraudy in his research states:

These institutions can influence party strategies through two different paths. First, conservative institutions may have the external influence of the party and threaten to cut valuable resources in case the party chooses not to defend their policy interests. Second, conservative institutions might choose to affect party strategies through the path of internal influence. In this path, representatives of the conservative institution occupy key party positions and block policies that may affect the interests of the institution. (2)

In 1960 Latin America faced deadliest earthquake and in that 5,000 people were dead. In this novel, Allende portrays earthquake and mention that 10,000 people are dead. She wants to project the massive changes which happened in the lives of the people. In the novel she has increased the number of the victims. The political parties failed to provide necessary things to the victims. In Latin America numerous Earthquakes and natural disaster occurred. The consolidated report of the Earthquake occurred since 1900 are as follows:

The Deadliest Latin American Earthquakes since 1900: South America = 10; Central America = 5; Mexico = 1; Caribbean = 11
 1970 May 31 Peru 66,000 dead M=7.8
 2 1939 Jan 25 Chile, Chillan 28,000 dead M=8.3
 3 1976 Feb 4 Guatemala 23,000 dead M=7.5
 4 1906 Aug 17 Chile, Santiago 20,000 dead M=8.6
 5 1985 Sep 19 Mexico, Michoacan 9,500 dead M= 8.1
 Estimated death toll as high as 30,000.
 6 1944 Jan 15 Argentina, San Juan 5,000 dead M=7.8
 7 1949 Aug 5 Ecuador, Ambato 6,000 dead M=6.8
 8 1972 Dec 23 Nicaragua, Managua 5,000 dead M=6.2
 9 1960 May 22 Chile 5,000 dead M=9.5
 10. (Staff)

The massive earthquake rocked the nation, leaving 10,000 dead and the country had been in ruin. The people never received the aid sent by the other foreign countries. The relief fund and the things like medicine, blankets, food, and daily required materials disappeared in the mysterious political labyrinths. After a year of the great chaos the relief things are available for purchase. Instead of distributing the supplies to the suffering and dying people, the corrupted government intercepted the supplies and sold them for profit. The novel exposes the repression in all three levels – familial, social and political. The characters express their resistance in order to eradicate repression from their families and society. They experience the repression in different ways based on their background, education and situation. The novel portrays the miserable existence of the peasants. As a revolutionary person, Pedro tries to disseminate the rights that working-class folks demanded.

Allende portrays the adversities of the lower class people in Latin America. She declares that political corruption is the main cause of the inequities in the country. The upper middle class, who has supported the coup, are jubilant. They support high tax, dictatorship rule and class discrimination. They believe that the loss of democratic liberties would only last for a short while. In the novel *The House of the Spirits* the last section chronicles the rise of the military coup. It removes the president in a bloody battle and leaves many people to die including Alba's uncle Jaime.

Alba's political opposition against the military tyranny is essentially projected by different characters like her lover Miguel, the soul of her grandma, and her companion, Ana Díaz. Alba does not have any genuine political conviction of her own. The author implements an unequivocal political position as a tool to communicate her inner thoughts. After Alba is captured during the military coup she is tormented and assaulted by Esteban García. She calmly accepts his torture and knows the reason behind his torture. He wants to take revenge on Esteban Trueba for suppressing his grandmother, Pancha Garcia. He states, "The day my grandfather tumbled his grandmother, Pancha García, among the rushes of the riverbank, he added another link to the chain of events that has to complete itself," (*THS* 431). Alba does not have the attitude of revenge and she does not want her child also to have this revengeful spirit. She affirms,

Afterward the grandson of the woman who is raped repeats the gesture with the granddaughter of the rapist, and perhaps forty years from now my grandson will knock Garcia's granddaughter down among the rushes, and so on down through the centuries in an unending tale of sorrow, blood, and love. (*THS* 432)

Alba's decision proves that revenge never gives a solution to a problem. Patience and sacrifice can create lots of changes in everyone's life. Alba is correctly directed and guided by the spirits in the house and she follows their advice. Several different attitudes are presented towards the inequality in *The House of the Spirits*. Esteban Trueba represents the conservative view that the status of upper class people should be maintained. According to him, the lower status of the peasants should remain the same. Pedro Tercero Garcia represents the revolutionary peasants who struggle to bring changes in the society. The Trueba women, as well as Jaime, support the peasants. They frame an important alliance between all of those who are subjugated by the patriarchal system.

Conclusion

Allende's Characters prove that they are repressed in familial, social, and political levels. Allende's life also reflects that she too is the best resilient. The paper has scrutinized the nature behind the resistance and resilience of the characters through the Matrix of Domination theory and Standpoint theory. Cognitive abilities, personality distinctions, problem-solving skills, self-control, and stress tolerance are the traits of resilience. Man can acquire strategies which subconsciously help them develop their psychological resilience. Allende's characters have strong mental power and they resist the repression successfully. They have become the best resilient and also trigger the various victims to overcome their failure and repression.

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