

Family: The Origin of Female Suppression in the Select Novels of Isabel Allende

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Abstract

Feminists in Latin America reject cultural norms and insist that there can be no such thing as a ‘positive macho man’ since male domination can ever be justified. They argue that patriarchal norms engrain some ideals, which results in women's enslavement and the consequent suppression of their voice. The present research paper focuses on the trilogy: Daughter of Fortune, Portrait in Sepia and The House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende. The trilogy depicts the oppression and dominance that women face in patriarchal households and the methods in which this oppression and dominance is addressed. She upends the family as a homogeneous unit, highlights the multiplicity of experience, and questions the traditional idea of family. With the assistance of the Family System Theory, this article will examine how Allende reimagines the traditional family by showing an unorthodox depiction of the typical family.

Keywords: Domination, Oppression, Family System theory, Patriarchy

Feminists in Latin America reject cultural norms and insist that there can be no such thing as a ‘positive macho man’ since male domination can ever be justified. They argue that patriarchal norms engrain some ideals, which results in women's enslavement and the consequent suppression of their voice. According to Lucero-liu and Christensen “the stereotypes of the good woman and the macho man may have many consequences on the Chicano population, including influences on sexual behaviour and sexual practices, labour force participation, educational values and behaviour, sexual identity, family violence and sexual and alcohol abuse” (102).

Familism, according to contemporary sociologists, is a fundamental feature of Latin American families. Families may be defined in four ways by Maxine Baca Zinn: depending on their size, depending on the strength of their familial bonds; extended or

multigenerational families; and their interactions with one another. Because of their huge size and emphasis on intergenerational ties, Isabel Allende's families adhere to the familism philosophy. Feminist family studies arose from the work of family sociologists such as Safilios-Rothschild, Bernard, Lopata, Peters, and Massey. *The Handbook of Feminist Family Studies* by Sally A. Lloyd et al summarizes the theoretical and methodological approach used by feminist family academics. According to them:

Collectively, their strategies included the following: a) exposing the patriarchal bias in presumptions about men, women and children in diverse families; b) asking previously unasked (and unaskable) questions about invisible family processes and structures; c) adding participant centric research methods that invited participants' voices to be heard; and d) contributing new knowledge about the lived experience of individual and family lives that mattered to both participants and researchers (and continue to matter today). (7)

All social institutions have a significant role for the family. Individuals use it to build their views about gender, class, race and the sexual division of labour, as well as their sexuality, and this helps them grow and evolve. Nuclear, multi-focal, extended or mixed families are just some of the options available to today's families. The study of families is a multidisciplinary endeavour. Research on the interrelationships between families, communities, and the different institutions that make up such communities has yielded several hypotheses. Several principles like boundaries, behaviours, and expectations are highlighted in Family System theory. Family, according to Human Ecology, is a micro system that develops and interacts with the natural environment as part of the ecosystem.

The home has long been a place where women's discrimination has thrived. A woman's identity is defined by her role as a mother, and her labour is defined by her role as a housewife. Feminist family studies emphasize the centrality of women as family members and the equality of their wants and aspirations with those of their male counterparts. Maggie Humm affirms, "One of the most valuable achievements of feminist theory has been its effort to deconstruct the family as a natural unity and to reconstruct it as a social unit - as ideology, as an institutional nexus of social and cultural meanings and relations" (87). The present research paper focuses on the trilogy: *Daughter of Fortune*, *Portrait in Sepia* and *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende. The trilogy depicts the oppression and dominance that women face in patriarchal households and the methods in which this oppression and dominance is addressed. She upends the family as a homogeneous unit, highlights the multiplicity of experience, and questions the traditional idea of family. With the assistance of the Family System Theory, this article will examine how Allende reimagines the traditional family by showing an unorthodox depiction of the typical family. In her trilogy, Allende explores atypical family structures and relationships. Orphans and adopted children, inter-class couples, and inter-racial couples are the common themes of her works. By depicting irregular familial relationships, Allende diminishes the relevance of the traditional family structure and emphasizes each individual's self-discovery. Each of

Isabel Allende's novels begin with a cliff hanger, where the protagonist has no idea where she comes from. As it turns out, the protagonists' fractured family and a mystery origin push them toward a discovery of her roots, which alters the family structure as well as redefining their self-identity. In the course of discovering themselves, individuals find their unique skills and abilities that let them fit into their own patriarchal worlds.

Eliza Sommers, the protagonist of *Daughter of Fortune*, was nurtured with a strong sense of self-importance. She was raised by a brother-and-sister duo, which only adds to the mystique surrounding her. When she was a child, she was told that she had two birth stories. According to Sommers, she is descended from an English ancestor. It was reported by Rose Sommers that, "The basket they had found at the office door was woven of the finest wicker and lined in batiste; Eliza's nightgown was worked with French knots and the sheets edged with Brussels lace, and topping everything was a mink coverlet, an extravagance never seen in Chile"(DOF 4). As she had Indian black hair, Mama Fresia insisted that she wasn't English. As far as she was concerned, you were "you were shivering and bundled up in a man's sweater. They hadn't even put a diaper on you, and you were covered with your own caca. Your nose was running and you were red as a boiled lobster, with a head full of fuzz like corn silk. That's how it was" (DOF 5). Although the subject of her birth had been hidden, both Rose and Mama Fresia agreed that March 15, 1832 was the day of her birth. In order to solve the puzzle of her birth and upbringing, she had to invent her own tale.

Eliza convinced herself that she was the child of a shipwreck and not of an unnatural mother capable of abandoning her and leaving her exposed to the uncertainty of a March day. She wrote in her diary that a fisherman had found her on the beach amid the debris of a beached ship, wrapped her in his sweater, and left her at the finest house in the English colony (DOF 6).

Thus, she succeeds in creating a kind of identity for herself that makes her to survive in the midst of tortures.

Eventually, she gained the self-assurance to follow her boyfriend to California in quest of a family she could make for herself because of her enigmatic upbringing and unusual family. It was also because she feared for the safety of her own kid and decided to leave everything behind and start a new life. Because of her illegitimate pregnancy, Eliza's family's reputation was damaged. She realized she had crossed the line of morality. Thus, she thought that "If she fled, the family reputation would be stained, but at least they would have the benefit of the doubt: they could always say she had died. Whatever story the Sommers offered the world, she wouldn't have to watch them suffer the shame" (DOF 152). So, she undertook an odyssey to find her lover and create a family for her own self by illegally travelling in the ship. With each step she took on her journey, she was slipping more into the odd delusion that would become her existence for the next few months. As if she were the protagonist and narrator of a whole new storey, she felt empowered. After moving to California, Eliza was able to break free of the constraints and norms that come with being female. For the first time ever, she felt like she was completely invisible to the rest of the world, as if she were wearing a man's attire, rather than a woman's. Now that she became accustomed to the confines of her petticoats, she can inhale and exhale freely. As a Chilean woman,

Fear had been her companion: fear of God and his unpredictable justice, of authority; of her adoptive parents, of illness and evil tongues, of anything unknown or different; fear of leaving the protection of her home and facing the dangers outside; fear of her own fragility as a woman, of dishonour and truth (DOF 275).

She grew in confidence and learnt to embrace each day as it came and discovered the inner power she had always possessed. She was able to let go of the shame and remorse

she had felt since her banishment. Because of her pregnancy, she felt confined and expressed her feeling. While riding through California's golden terrain, she felt like a condor, free and at one with the world. Neither she nor her partner regretted anything they had shared, nor were they embarrassed of the fires that had altered their lives. Instead, she felt that they had strengthened her, tempered her, and given her a sense of accomplishment in making decisions and bearing the costs that came with them.

After moving to California, she fell in love with her independent life. When she wore her man's clothing, she feels at ease. By writing, Eliza was able to create a real identity for herself, discover freedom, and let go of the shame she carried, "This land is a blank page; here I can start life anew and become the person I want. No one knows me but you; no one knows my past, I can be born again" (DOF 280).

Aurora Del Valle, the protagonist of *Portrait in Sepia*, was brought up in two distinct cultures without ever learning her actual ancestry. Even though she is referred to as Aurora and Lai Ming, there is just one image of her as an infant and countless photos of her mother. She was raised by her maternal grandparents in Chinatown till the age of five because her mother had died in childbirth and her father had refused to have any contact with her. Eliza Sommers, Tao Chien's maternal grandmother, entrusted her custody to Paulina Del Valle, her paternal grandmother, who erases any evidence of her background. Adding to Aurora's perplexity, her uncle Severo Del Valle had adopted her. When it comes to finding out where she came from, she's back where she started. If someone ever questioned Paulina's parentage, she would always say that, "they were dead, and that it was all right because having a grandmother like her was more than enough" (PIS 136). When she asked Eliza the same question later in the storey, she answered, "Who conceived you is not really important, Lai Ming; anyone could do that. Severo is the one who gave you his name and took responsibility for you" (PIS 283). She was plagued by dreams of youngsters in black pyjamas as a result of all this uncertainty. She expresses herself through her writing:

Because of my dreams, I am different, like people who because of a genetic illness or some deformity have to make a constant effort to live a normal life. They bear visible signs; mine can't be seen, but it exists. I can compare it to attacks of epilepsy, which come on suddenly and leave a wake of confusion behind. I am aft-aid to go to bed at night; I don't know what will happen while I'm sleeping, or how I will wake up." (PIS 95-96).

Consequently, she uncovers her latent photographic ability, which made her an expert in the language of body, gesture, and stare; and her images would later be used to assist her solve the mystery of her husband's adultery.

In the end, Aurora found the fortitude to leave her spouse and pursue her dreams. A poor marriage had made her brave enough to start a new relationship and break with tradition by refusing to marry. She says in her memoir, "The advantage of being lovers is that we have to work hard at our relationship, because everything conspires to drive us apart. Our decision to be together has to be renewed again and again; that keeps us on our toes" (PIS 288). That's why we find Aurora at the beginning of the storey writing her memoir, which she hopes would give her life a sense of purpose,

I can say I have a good life. I have the means and the freedom to do what I want; I can devote myself fully to travelling the length of Chile's abrupt geography with my camera around my neck,...People talk behind my back, it's inevitable; they cannot tolerate a woman who left her husband. Those

slights do not keep me awake; I don't have to please everyone, only those who truly matter to me, and they are not many (PIS 276-277).

In *The House of the Spirits*, Alba was reared by her mother Blanca in her maternal grandparents' house. Her stepfather's surname Satigny was listed on her birth certificate. Aristocrat who died of a fever in the northern desert, her father had always been described to her as a dignified and clever man. After many years, Alba was finally confronted with the revelation of her true parentage when she was tasked with identifying the body of her father's killer. This realization made her realize how much of her father Pedro Tercero's rebellious character had been passed on to her. Through her unique upbringing and engagement in the country's political and civil liberties movements, Alba was able to establish a strong sense of self-determination. Alba later played an important part in the country's class struggle and political crisis, fending off every form of horrible brutality and rape she was exposed to in the novel. By reading her grandmother's diaries and her grandfather's stories, she reclaims her history as the book's narrator. Women are shown and given specific skills in Allende's depictions of family, which aid in the development of their own self-identities in the patriarchal society.

She develops mother-centric households in her trilogy in which the mother acts as a nurturing, protector and educator. In the trilogy, women take the lead in both storyline and action. Esteban Trueba is the only male character in the trilogy who does not succumb to the brave women of her family at the end of the novel. Traditional family values and traditions are comfortably challenged by women of different generations who have a profound impact on each other. Tess Cosslett defines a "matrilineal narrative as one which either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors" (7). There are various intergenerational ties and legacy threads in the trilogy, thus it is possible to understand it has a matrilineal narrative.

Family systems theory (Kerr and Bowen, 1988) is a theory of human behaviour that defines the family unit as a complex social system, in which members interact to influence each other's behaviour. Family members interconnect, allowing to view the system as a whole rather than as individual elements. (Capuzzi and Stauffer 151)

Understanding human behaviour through the lens of Family Systems Theory illustrates the relationships within families as well as the contexts in which they exist. Numerous fields, including psychotherapy and family therapy, have been utilized in the Family Systems Theory. Allende is able to change the dominant patriarchal order in the private sphere family by constructing matrilineal linkages that influenced the growth and development of the younger generations. She redefines family in various different ways and makes it the realm of domestic bliss and not gender domination. Baber and Allen in their book *Women and Families: Feminist Reconstructions* define women's oppression as "beliefs, attitudes, and acts that exclude women in general from experience and activities that enhance their growth and development, their access to resources, and their access to power" (7).

Most of the women face the gender discrimination in their own patriarchy family system. Family is the first place where the women undergo insults, pain, sufferings, and discrimination. Through the mother daughter portrayal Allende describes how every women fights for their liberty in their young age but later unfortunately they turns as the

ambassadors of the patriarchy system and advices her daughter to adhere the unwanted traditions and culture. The women first express their protest against the suppression and revolt against their patriarchy family. Allende's female protagonist confronts their issues and fights for their identity.

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