

# **The House of Spirits – The Female Influence and the Chilean Military Dictatorship**

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## **Abstract**

*The present work is the result of the reflections provided by the classes of the Postgraduate Program in Sociocultural Practices and Social Development, at the University of Cruz Alta - UNICRUZ (RS). Thus, the proposal of analyzing and explaining the literary work "The House of Spirits" by the Chilean writer Isabel Allende was brought forward. Book that became a bestseller in Brazil, after its release in April 1984. This work aims to examine the construction of Isabel Allende's success in the 1980s, through the biographical and historical analysis of the representations of Chile, the Chilean military dictatorship and the reference to the female gender, elements that appear in her writings. The history of the work "The House of Spirits" portrays the life of the Trueba family, which over four generations was part of the social and political movements of Chile. The main figures of the plots are always women, especially the one who embodies the role of the writer, with the function of organizing and recreating the memory of the family in a text that allows establishing deep connections with other narratives of Latin American women.*

**Keywords:** History, Chile, Literature, Female, Dictatorship.

## **Initial thoughts**

Literature is organized as a form of artistic manifestation that conducts different social aspects of the reality that it propends to portray. In this sense, the rites, heroes, conflicts and narratives arising from literary works fulfill their social function in the production of a space for the interaction of socio-historical values between the subjects involved (author and reader) and, thus, literature exists in this cultural exchange.

Between Literature and Social Sciences, it is necessary to consider the relationship of literature with political, social, economic and cultural history, its relationship with literary tradition and literature. In the context of literary studies in Latin America, "resistance" has theoretical-critical meaning repeatedly referred to deal with works that problematize historical episodes of exception, such as the military dictatorships experienced or moments of so-called post-colonialism. To say that a certain literary work is associated with a perspective of resistance suggests, in this line of reasoning, to point out thematic elements that attest to the contrariness of the artistic text to a social system, to a political regime, to a cultural experience, to certain social practices, such as those related to gender, identity, violence, marginalization, etc.

In this sense, the general objective is to understand from the analysis *The House of Spirits*, by Isabel Allende, a work of 1982. This narrative tells the saga that spans three generations of the same family, the Trueba, marked by magic, love and tragedy. Allende's narrative is characterized by an indisputable social and historical lucidity, combining fantastic realism with the harsh reality of the time.

## **1 The female influence on the work and some characteristics of the novel in the approach**

Representations of the social role of women commonly show them as fragile, innocent and submissive beings to man and cultural traditions. As a result, women, in literary plots, usually occupy a place of oppression or inferiority, especially in the texts that address the political environment, a field in which, from this perspective, male power pre-weights. In a way, the figure of man as a universal subject is characterized as a constant, and women, "locked up" in this male world, stuck to the conditions of patriarchal society, where their function would be almost exclusively, domestic care, collected in a great extent of prejudices and ignorance that kept them from the right to education, reserved solely for men (BARROS, 2012).

In this scenario, in 1981, the writer Isabel Allende, upon receiving news that her grandfather, then 99 years old, was about to die, and motivated by the series of stories told through letters written by him, begins the construction of the work named "The House of Spirits", published in 1982. When analyzing the work, the author's proposal shows a perspective of approach to female and male roles quite different from what was found until then in the literature, evidenced, above all, by the emphasis on female characters that integrate history, bringing the strong idea of a kind of tribute to feminist movements and the image of women. The writer brings in her literary arrangement the marks of the ideals of feminist movements, which revolutionized not only the stories of writings, but also the conception of female roles in society. Chilean writer Isabel Allende highlights her feminist position through her characters, whose works confirm her

position on gender (BARROS, 2012).

The author appears as a feminist woman and concerns about talking about the violence promoted by the dictatorial government in her country. However, his text is not free of contradictions, which are evident in the way violence is portrayed. About the account of the military coup and dictatorship in the country, the reader is orated by the trivialization of the drama of Chilean reality, when romanticized solutions for emblematic scenes of torture are presented in the book, for example. Otherwise, the writer's feminist ideology appears, based on a bourgeois conception of "being a woman", responsible for building an imaginary of empowerment, but only for women of high social class, with indigenous, peasant and lower social women remaining on a stereotyped level of submissive and voiceless women. (ARAÚJO, 2018).

During the period of military rule in Chile, Isabel Allende witnessed intense and touching events, which came to add to the knowledge of the stories of struggles and pains experienced by a generation of Chilean women. Feminism makes the novel "The House of Spirits" extraordinary, presenting a form of tribute to women, especially Chilean women. Thus, it is a form of homage to women and feminist movements, since the attitudes of the characters are contrary to the pattern of feminine behavior imposed by the society of the time. From the patriarchal perspective, the man held the dominance of the female figure, being manipulated in male hands and serving as an object of his desires (CONTRI; ALVES, 2015).

According to Zolin (2004) the feminist perspective, initially developed in the 1960s, when using gender as an object of study, had notoriety in several areas of knowledge. This influence is also perceived in the field of literature and literary criticism, where discussions covering the theme of gender have achieved a very relevant space.

On the other hand, in this novel, it also presents the woman faced or confronted with her own image and sexual/social roles. The debate about the re-creation of class and race relations, spaces that are not only understood as private and public also reach the narrative, since Allende works with urban and rural scenarios (GONZALEZ, 2016).

Isabel Allende's work contains a narrative sensitive to the expressions of machismo present in Chilean society in the mid-last century. In a way, these discussions also influenced other Latin American countries. According to Piscitelli (2009, p.119) the genus:

[...] in its most widespread versions, it refers to a concept elaborated by feminist thinkers precisely to dismantle this double procedure of naturalization through which the differences that are attributed to men and women are considered innate, derived from natural distinctions, and the inequalities between one another are perceived because of these differences. In the language of everyday life and of the sciences, the word sex refers to these innate, biological distinctions. [...] feminist authors used the term gender to refer to the cultural character of the distinctions between men and women, between ideas about femininity and masculinity.

Dialogical learning assumes that, in view of genealogy as a patriarchal mechanism, it is up to this other feminist genealogy, in two senses: first as a methodology that seeks through the relationship of power/knowledge, to analyze the construction of subjectivity and gender identity and, secondly, in a strong sense, as a reconstruction of a historical, symbolic and cultural memory, providing self-recognition within

a new logical, literary, creative and political configuration (MAGDA, 2007).

Sánchez and Cruz (1999) distinguish three main thematic lines of female literary production: the one about sexual inequality, another about women's education, and a third on the conceptualization of female identities. On the third thematic line, the scholars point out that, in general terms, romantic writers, for the most part, more than resuming the androcentric female ideal, they tended to interpret it in a more moderate, objective way, according to social reality and in accordance with their own gender experiences. Characteristic that contributed to evidence the historical falsehood that behaved the dominant female ideal.

In Figueiredo's view (2013, p. 14), the writings of Latin women share a characteristic with contemporary romance in general: "[...] self-reflexivity, the presence of the writer at his desk, his crises and his difficulties in the work of creation." They are also the presence of self-referential and metafictional elements. They operate with resignifications and recreate plots that strange ankylosis patterns. The literary works were classified as palimpsest: "[...] works whose appearance hides or obscures deeper and less accessible, less acceptable levels of meanings" (SAAVEDRA, 2013, p. 57).

Isabel Allende's works are characterized by mixing the magician with the real. The mystery, the premonitions, the coincidences, are part of the daily life of their characters. Adherent to the literary genre Magical Realism, Isabel Allende elevates the history of her country and the facts that permeate the memory of a nation that lived a long period of military dictatorship. João Manuel Cunha argues that literature has the power to recover historical facts:

The facts she recovers are not the facts remembered by memory, but facts that are memory itself, as a record for non-forgetfulness. Compared to the memorialist prose, this literature of urgency poses, for literary studies, other problems as instigating as those created by the witness text. (2008, p. 3).

During all this, Isabel Allende is seen and recognized as one of the first women to achieve notoriety in Latin American literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With more than seventy million books sold, she is considered the most widely read Spanish-speaking living writer in the world (THE MIND IS WONDERFUL, 2020). Characterized by literary activism against patriarchal ideological guidelines, he offered women an extensive manifesto about their personal awakening.

## **2 The memory described in the work**

The process of defining the technical specifications of the literary work proposes a detail of the essential elements and characteristics that will illustrate the context brought by the story to be portrayed. Starting from the concept of memory of Jacques Le Goff (2003), we must:

[...] memory as the property of retaining certain information, first refers us to a set of psychic functions through which man can update past impressions or information, or what it represents as past (LE GOFF, 2003, p. 387).

Using the memories of the biographer implies understanding that she is in a tangle of relationships

at the time of writing her memories and distant from what she recalls, having elements she recalls and others that are forgotten, others that she prefers to silence and even those who are confused by psychic and neurological issues. Therefore, memorialistic narrative is used considering that it is partial, incomplete and diffuse, but that it can still illuminate issues and contribute to the elucidation of historical processes.

The novel "The House of Spirits" tells the family story of Senator Esteban Trueba. Although the book is the writer's first published work, the narrative is directly related to the stories of "The Daughter of Fortune" and "Portrait in Sepia", later published in the years 1998 and 2000. The characters move from one book to another, forming a large memory network of some branches of the same family.

The drama of the characters inevitably permeates the history of Chile. "The House of Spirits" is marked by the events that occurred between 1905 and 1975, especially with the military coup led by Augusto Pinochet Ugarte.

Politics and questions about the gender perspective are objects present and worked by the author, and one of the main characteristics of this novel is the approach to women's stories: "Politics is only one of the domains where gender can be used for historical analysis" (SCOTT, 1988, p. 23). Joan Scott conjecture about the reasons why the author Isabel Allende made the choice of these objects that involve and plot the novel:

Firstly, because it is a virtually unexplored territory since gender has been perceived as an antithetical category to the serious business of true politics. Then, because political history – which is still the dominant mode of historical interrogation – was the bastion of resistance to the inclusion of materials or questions about women and gender (1988, p. 24).

The relationship of the writer Isabel Allende with the Chilean political context of the 1960s and 1970s is very close, because, in addition to living in Chile at that time, she is the daughter of the diplomat Tomás Allende Pesce, cousin of the former President of Chile, Salvador Allende, overthrown by the military coup of September 11, 1973. Thus, fiction is confused with the life of the writer herself (KUNZ, 2009).

Isabel Allende and her family were some of the citizens affected by the undemocratic process. There are several reasons why she and her family entered the radar of the military regime of General Augusto Pinochet, right at the beginning of the dictatorship. Among the factors, as mentioned above, is recorded his kinship with former President Salvador Allende, who died at the time the La Moneda Palace is taken; as well as because her stepfather had been ambassador to Salvador Allende's government and finally, Isabel Allende's family had sheltered politically persecuted people. This leads her to seek exile with her family, which will mark her life and be a theme that will permeate her first works, because she considers it inevitable to talk about the violence of the dictatorship. The writer can be classified in the group of those who applied for political asylum and the choice of her family was Venezuela because it was a democratic country in the 1975s.

### **3 Chilen military coup of 1973**

Until the 1970s, Chile was distinguished by political stability, following a democratic and multi-party regime of about 40 years, with a policy of alternation in power, female voting since 1949 and universal suffrage in 1970 (AGGIO, 1993).

The dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet, installed in 1973 and which lasted until 1990, was characterized by the intense repression of all forms of expression that came to be seen as reactionary and contesting. The government specialized the police and the national army, creating repression centers, with an administrative centrality and an organization that made it possible to cover the entire national territory. Most social movements did not react against the government's repressive actions. According to Policzer (1998, p. 330):

Pinochet assumed the title of supreme commander of the nation in late 1973, consolidated his position by becoming president [...]. As a top figure, military and political, in the country, the concentration of powers in Pinochet's hands had never been a precedent in Chilean history.

In dictatorial political regimes individual rights are extremely low. Although, in some cases, one of a political party may coexist, most of them have no power to interfere with the decisions taken by the ruling or ruling group. The choice of the group or individual who will rule the country occurs indirectly. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that these regimes live on appearances, trying to show the population a corrupted view of their true oppressive idea (SPINDEL, 1985, p. 37).

To maintain control and order over cultural manifestations in general, the Pinochet government created military groups of repression and extermination that developed from a secret group of army majors and colonels, commanded by Colonel Manuel Contrera called the "Committee of colonels" adherent to the Chilean military school during the military coup (SILVA, 2006).

The biographical trajectory of Chilean writer Isabel Allende is important for contemporaneity, as it contains elements that help to better understand the impacts of the military dictatorship on people's lives, as highlighted and expresses the context of her literary narrative. At the same time, it allows us to reflect on which mechanisms have determined access to the publishing market, configuring itself as a successful author and with so many "bestsellers".

The presentation of Isabel Allende's life story allows us to reflect the dialectical movement between society and the individual, with the intention of "verifying the interstitial character [...] agents and to observe how normative systems ... that are never without contradictions work normally" (LEVI, 1996). Social change cannot be analyzed without recognizing, in advance, the irreducible existence of a certain freedom vis-to-vis of rigid forms and the origins of the reproduction of the structures of domination.

The writer Isabel Allende, through her work, manages to address the inconsistencies of Chilean society of the period. Among the historical facts narrated and the complexities of gender relations, he points out that a large part of the middle class rejoiced with the military coup, since they imagined that the regime would mean a return to order, cleaning of customs, skirts for women and short hair for men (ALLENDE, 1984).

The context of the work allows us to point out the subdivisions between "the things" of men and women, between "the things" of the bourgeois and those of the people, because "the proletarians do not complain", ideas in force when writing the text. In such a way, the writer Isabel Allende defends a complex class-gender problem, at the center of the political actions that recreate the ideological scenario, to narrate the coup d'état in Chile, an event that for an author like Franz Hinkelammert "It was not a traditional military coup through which a military group takes over the government, ensuring the continuity of a bourgeois society already installed. He insists on declaring that: 'The Chilean military coup was a national security coup'" (1999, p. 252).

In any case, what would be the point of converting the fruit of imagination, the imagined one, into a historical or political matter? The political sensitivity of the artist is produced, preferably and in its maximum authenticity, creating broader concerns than any catechism or collection of ideas expressed. The artist will not reduce himself to guiding an electoral vote of the crowd, or to reinforce an economic revolution. It is preferable, in the first place, to arouse a new political sensitivity in man, a new political raw material in human nature. (VALLEJO, 1927, p. 209-210).

With the end of the Chilean dictatorship and the coming of President Patricio Aylwin Azócar to power in 1990, the Chilean federal government decided to investigate all the crimes of human rights violations that the Chilean Supreme Court had filed in previous years, under pressure from the army. With the creation of a Truth Commission, it was possible to ascertain the side of history that until then was left in the background by the military. In 1991, the Chilean government confirmed that 2,279 people were killed for political reasons, of which 946 of them disappeared. 164 people were included in the list of "victims of political violence", which included police officers and members of the far left killed in conflicts and street marches. The committee also decided that 641 cases could not be investigated for lack of documentation and data (RETTIG, 2020).

## **Final notes**

The whole of the autobiography and the social conditions of publication of his first novel, as well as the historical context of the time, did not unveil such a great association between the two figures, Isabel and Salvador Allende. However, Salvador Allende has a strong symbolism for the international community in general and this proved to be one of the most striking elements for the highlight that the author has achieved in the publishing market. We can contemplate the role of female imports and a peculiar idea of nationality. It is not a question of palpating the great story but of something that seems to be much more accessible: the understanding of these women about the connections: nation-memory, nationality-memory.

The historical biography of the writer evidenced through her work led to reaffirm the dimension that the military coup has and had in her life and in her insertion in the literary environment, as a Latin American woman. His trajectory, in the political sphere, is connected to the figure of his uncle. The actions of the Popular Unity, Salvador Allende as president and defender of the "Chilean way to socialism" and the developments of the military dictatorship led to a set of reactions that even seem in jail, due to the dimension of the impact of a dictatorship along the lines that was that of Augusto Pinochet (for violence, duration, etc.). This has given us possibilities for analysis, but conclusions still very partial, with the amount

of sources that could be considered in this article.

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