

# Magical Realism and Historical Memory: Narrating Justice, Power, and Trauma in *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende

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**Abstract---** *Magical Realist analysis of The House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende, specifically in relation to historical memory. The novel describes the story of the True family throughout multiple generations, all within the context of changing times in Latin American society and politics (Flores, 1955). The author uses the supernatural powers of one of the characters, Clara, to unite magic and realism in order to reveal deeper meanings. In fact, the ability of Clara to prophesize, maintain her silence and be in touch with the spirits allows the novel to step out of realism and deal with memory through various symbols. The key element in understanding the theme of historical memory in the novel is Clara's tendency to keep journals. These journals become essential for remembering personal tragedies, social inequalities and political oppression in time of war and dictatorships. In summary, magical realism can be employed to capture and preserve a history that would otherwise be sidelined or overlooked due to lack of documentation in formal records. In the present study, the analysis is extended to incorporate the problems described in the book into broader world objectives of equality, justice, and social progress. First of all, through the life of Clara, there occurs a hidden resistance against the oppression of males. Other scenes in the narrative also reveal class struggle and social injustice. Finally, oppression and violation of human rights depicted in the book highlight the need for justice and democracy. In general, the current research finds that the use of magical realism in The House of the Spirits goes beyond a literary style and serves as a significant strategy to preserve historical legacy and highlight gender discrimination and social injustice.*

**Keywords---** *Magical Realism, Historical Memory, Social Justice, Gender Inequality, Political Oppression.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

LATIN American literature is distinguished by its strong relationship to history and culture as well as social issues. It addresses the complex experiences of colonization and politics, social inequality and the mixing of cultures, while bringing together personal stories and major events from history. Latin American literature focuses on important themes, such as identity and power, resistance and memory. In doing so, it provides insight into life experiences of certain communities

and people that were previously not heard. The value of Latin American literature is in its capacity to reflect different cultures and their interaction, including the indigenous culture, the culture of colonialism, and the current one. By addressing social and political issues, Latin American literature presents reality as well as offers new interpretations and insights into it. This genre is unique among other types of literature due to its close association with history and politics as well as the cultural experience of Latin American people. It is common for writers belonging to this tradition to incorporate personal stories with significant historical events, thus producing literature that is both highly personal and politically relevant. The most unique aspect of Latin American literature is that it often incorporates magical realism in its narratives (Hart & Ouyang, 2005). In this narrative mode, the extraordinary and even the supernatural become commonplace events, allowing the authors to rise above the limitations of realism and thus uncover deeper truths, particularly those related to memories and traumatic experiences. One of the key instances of using this literary technique is the story entitled "The House of the Spirits" authored by Isabel Allende (Allende, 1985). This piece of writing is devoted to telling the story about Trueba family over many years and generations. In the context of major changes taking place in Latin America, this literary work addresses such themes as the issues of power, repression, gender, as well as socio-economic problems related to class differences. Clara, who possesses magical abilities, is one of the main characters whose journals allow linking past and present events.

*Barrabás came to us by sea...*

*Clara wrote in her notebooks...*

*She recorded everything that happened...*

*So that nothing would ever be forgotten.*

(Allende pg.5),

These aspects show how writing is used as a tool to preserve memory and prevent oneself from forgetting. In other words, the narrative shows how memory could be used as a means of resistance through preventing oneself from being forgotten. The approach that will be taken in analyzing *The House of the Spirits* is that of magical realism. The study will focus on the way in which the narration in the novel depicts and preserves the memory of history (Lukács, 1983). In addition, this essay will be dedicated to such themes as justice, equality, and social

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development as presented in the literary piece. The story of Clara can serve as a brilliant example of how strong the silent struggle of women is within the context of patriarchal society. There is much to say about social issues and class discrimination in *The House of the Spirits*. In this case, the themes of political tyranny and violation of people's rights become relevant in terms of understanding why such concepts as justice, social awareness, and inclusiveness are crucial. It is necessary to emphasize the author's method of storytelling, which makes political reality clearer.

Indeed, the literary criticism associated with *The House of the Spirits* has mainly revolved around themes that relate to the complex narration, politics and personal histories entangled in one, and use of magic realism to portray reality. Scholars like Wendy B. Faris and Alejo Carpentier, among others, have made important contributions towards the analysis of magic realism as a narrative technique whereby the strange and supernatural merge seamlessly with the everyday reality in order to portray a deeper reality. According to Faris, magic realism is a way of portraying a "dual reality" where strange elements coexist with the real without disturbing our sense of normalcy, and thus enable writers to convey a deeper reality to the reader. This observation becomes extremely important when we consider how in *The House of the Spirits* Clara's ability to perform miracles is regarded as something normal, indicating the fact that magic realism works well as a narrative device in itself. Furthermore, Carpentier's idea of the "marvelous real" states that the marvelous already exists within the history, culture and social circumstances of Latin America. For him, magic is inherent in the very nature of Latin America, as well as in the diversity and complexity of its characteristics. This notion correlates greatly with the depiction of political turmoil, social injustice, and cultural diversity of the society in the novel, where magic becomes inherent in the very nature of reality. All these theoretical concepts, combined together, can provide readers with the explanation of the mechanisms through which magic realism works in the novel (Márquez, 1970).

## II. MAGICAL REALISM AND NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION

Magical realism is used in *The House of the Spirits* as a storytelling method that aims to capture the underlying elements of the social and political situations that emerge and the emotions associated with them in the lives of the characters portrayed in the book. Magic in *The House of the Spirits* is significantly connected to life events that occur because of oppression, inequality, and resistance. The connection between the magic and the reality in this case makes it possible for another reality that exists in silence to emerge. Clara plays a central role in the narrative method (Bowers, 2004).

The relationship that Clara maintains with the outside world reveals another way of looking at the world wherein intuition and memory carry an equal weight as empirical facts. On the other hand, Clara's life experiences are reflective of the experiences women encounter under patriarchal governments. As a wife of Esteban Trueba, Clara has to live in his neglect, ignorance, and even cruelty. However, Clara doesn't react to all these oppressions through direct confrontation with her

husband but, instead, resorts to another means of expressing herself. She remains quiet. Through the eyes of magical realism, this silence takes a deeper meaning of being strong resistance against her oppressor (Carpentier, 1957).

Magic Realism enhances the portrayal of this scenario in relation to the effects that marginality has emotionally and psychologically. In other words, the novel is not concerned only with the material effect of inequality, but with the psychological effect of the same on identity and belonging. This makes the author successful in pointing out how such social arrangements have an effect on people's lives. On the other hand, political oppression is another element that is captured in magical realism form as follows:

*"They took away those who spoke...*

*Those who questioned...*

*Those who remembered...*

*And no one knew where they had gone."*

*(Allende, Chapter: The Terror, p.430)*

The subsequent parts of the novel represent a violent period of fear and oppression. Individuals are being silenced and oppressed; thus, memory represents an important weapon against this reality. Remembering the past and keeping the stories alive is an act of resisting the oppressive nature of the regime by preserving its true nature. Magical realism helps this resistance in keeping the memory strong and alive throughout the book. The main function of Alba in this case consists in carrying out this mission by telling stories of the past. Thus, the narrator uses the diary written by Clara for her to recreate stories from the family's history and to transform them into an important testimony against injustice and oppression. Hence, the story-telling is seen as an important way to confront the oppressive reality and to resist the unjust rule of the regime. Additionally, the combination of realism and magical elements in storytelling serves to convey emotional aspects of the experience which could not be represented otherwise. Thus, emotions such as fear and resilience are portrayed through magical means in addition to events that take place.

Preserving stories through Clara's journals and Alba's narration guarantees that stories about suffering do not vanish. Magical realism plays a crucial role in preserving these stories because they retain their presence in the story, refusing to let them disappear. In fact, Alba's character serves as the continuation of Clara's legacy. In her effort to remember the past, she turns these stories into testimonies. It is important to emphasize that Alba does not simply recount stories; instead, she interprets the meaning of what happened. Magical realism helps her because this literary technique makes it possible to have several timelines in one place at once. This is why Alba's narration is a reflection upon her traumatic experiences. Emotional aspect of magical realism is especially obvious in the novel through its representation of trauma. Violence and loss are not always depicted realistically; in some cases, they may be shown metaphorically and in relation to the supernatural world. Thus, through this approach, the author can manage to emphasize the importance of these occurrences without using any descriptions only. The presence of magic in the book allows for such an exploration of these issues, making the suffering of

the character more noticeable. However, at the same time, there is also an accent on survival since, despite all the oppression and violence, the characters are surviving. Magical realism, which is used in the novel *The House of the Spirits*, plays an important role in the reader's engagement with the work. Magical realism necessitates reconsideration of one's concept of reality as well as a greater understanding of social and historical phenomena. Through the elements of memory, resistance, and continuity, the story highlights the need for the inclusion of certain events in memory so that they cannot be forgotten. The use of magical realism within the context of *The House of the Spirits* exemplifies the significance of this approach as well as its role beyond aesthetic considerations. Through the use of magical realism, it is possible to express the complexities of reality as it relates to individuals' experience and social concerns (Faris, 2004).

### III. POWER, MEMORY, AND HISTORY

In "The House of the Spirits" by Isabel Allende, the role of memory in narrating the story functions as an effective way of constructing history, hence revealing the complex relationship between history, power, and identity. In the process, history becomes portrayed as a dynamic element, one that cannot be perceived as either neutral or objective, but which can be retold using memory, which, in essence, is always subjective. Through the use of individual and collective memories, Allende goes against the grain of dominant narratives of history, where authoritative versions of history prevail. Clara's diaries emerge as an essential archival collection that enables people to recall both routine and extraordinary events from the past. Through her diaries, Clara tries to infuse life with meaning by resisting the oblivion of the past and recording events in a chronological order as shown in the excerpt:

*"She wrote to bring order to the confusion...  
To capture the fleeting moments of life...  
To hold on to what would otherwise disappear...  
And to make sense of everything she had lived."  
(Allende, Chapter: Clara's notebooks, p.140)*

Here, memory becomes an active process that maintains the connection between different periods, thus keeping the past experiences alive through the narratives. The journals become the basis for the Alba's reconstruction of her family's history, which shows how memory is always in motion and changes its nature because it is based on interpretation and re-telling. In the book, the act of remembering becomes essential in the process of identity creation as people come to learn more about themselves when interacting with their memories. However, such interaction is especially relevant in the socio-political context in which the official version of the history ignores all those parts of the history that would cause pain and discomfort related to violence, inequality, and oppression. Magical realism contributes to the presentation of remembering because it allows combining different time layers and demonstrates the inseparable link between the past and the present as well as the influence of the former on the latter. The presence of the spirits and the traces of the past events show the presence of history in the world beyond time.

In this respect, the narrative brings up another crucial factor related to the process of historical representation, namely, the use of power to influence the representation. In the story, the character of Esteban Trueba demonstrates the nature of power, which not only includes the control over material factors but also over people's memories and stories about themselves. The process of traumatic remembering is further analyzed by the author to reveal how experiences of violence and injustice become a part of people's life story. Instead of portraying trauma as the end of the ability to speak, the author shows how it results in new means of expression, namely storytelling. Magical realism turns out to be a perfect technique for such representation since it makes it possible to visualize personal experiences and communicate emotions. In this regard, it can be mentioned that political repression provides an example when people are exposed to violence and silencing, as follows from the following quote from the narrative:

*"They came in the night without warning...  
Taking those who dared to speak...  
Those who refused to forget...  
Leaving only silence behind them."  
(Allende, Chapter: The dictatorship, p. 420)*

In these instances, memories serve as resistance, since the remembering of certain events contradicts any attempt to deny or falsify the truth. The function fulfilled by Alba's remembrance of the past can be seen in terms of resistance, since her storytelling turns memories into testimonies that ensure that the stories of suffering receive recognition. Alba's reading of Clara's diary helps her put together pieces of fragmented memories, revealing that memories are not only recollections but rather an effort to interpret certain events.

Moreover, through its story, it is clear that there is some sense of ethical imperative when it comes to remembering because it can be said that there is a moral responsibility to remember and to account for the past, especially when there is something unjust about the way the past has been treated. For Alba, her act of narrating can be seen as a kind of testimony because of the following reason:

*"I write so that memory will remain...  
So that the truth will not be erased...  
So that those who suffered are remembered...  
And their voices are not lost."  
(Allende, Final section, p.480)*

This is what highlights the importance of storytelling as a way of guaranteeing continuity and making history a challenge to oppressive institutions.

In *The House of the Spirits*, the importance of memory as an agent that changes individuals' identities and histories becomes highlighted. In the novel, the author makes use of magical realism as a genre that provides for many other ways of narration, which may have been impossible before. By using both reality and magic, the narrator is able to narrate about the stories of individuals who experience different types of sufferings and difficulties. Their reality is complex since history is not made up of one single truth. History must be viewed from

all angles, as noted earlier, and this can be done by means of telling their stories.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

##### *Concluding Remarks*

In conclusion, Isabel Allende's novel "The House of the Spirits" can be regarded as an outstanding work which violates traditions in the field of magic realism in order to redefine the concepts of memory and history. History can no longer be considered as something immutable and objective. On the contrary, it is perceived as a dynamic phenomenon that changes all the time because of personal experience and emotional memory. Through generations' stories, memory becomes the driving factor for reimagining and reconstructing the past, thereby undermining the traditional understanding of history as something dictated by the authorities. Clara's journals play an important role in the process of creating new histories, as they are a medium that enables the translation of individual memory into collective history that can survive for generations. Writing a journal becomes a way of imposing sense on experience, a method of preserving the truth. The concept of memory as resistance is reinforced by having Alba serve as the narrator, as she creates the history of the family through an engagement with Clara's texts as well as her own experience, which results in the creation of a cohesive memory as testimony against oppression and as an affirmation of remembering.

In fact, the use of magical realism by the author in this novel plays an important role since it goes beyond conventional

realism. Through the introduction of the supernatural as a natural part of everyday life in the novel, the story does not limit itself to the boundaries of the realist approach to the world as we know it, because there is much more to our lives than what is visible and tangible. Instead, magical realism in the novel makes it possible for the author to go beyond these boundaries and capture the complexities of human life and existence. In this context, memory and its presence throughout our lives are a significant issue in the novel since through the introduction of the supernatural, it becomes clear that in addition to the present, there is the memory of the past that continues to be part of the lives of individuals and even of collective memory and history.

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