

Mother-Daughter Relationships and Women's Bonding in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

Manashi Bora

Abstract

Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* presents for study a range of issues related to women. The novel weaves family saga with the history of the nation and encompasses the lives of women within the home as well as outside. Of particular significance in the novel are the relationships amongst mothers, daughters and grand-daughters as they navigate their lives through the patriarchal society of Chile which went through tumultuous times in the 1970s as the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende was deposed in a military coup which in its turn unleashed a reign of terror. This paper will, from a generally feminist position, investigate the relationships among mothers, daughters and granddaughters and amongst women in general, within the family and also in the outside world; these relationships present a tale of solidarity, support and connection among women in good times as well as bad. Such connections enable them to inscribe their lives and stories for posterity and tide over the crises in their family history as well as the history of the nation.

Keywords: Communism; Family; Patriarchy; Reign of terror; Women's suffrage.

Mother-daughter relationships and bonding among women resulting in the formation of communities of women are vital areas of concern in women's studies. Such relationships and communities develop solidarity among women and help them to share their problems and experiences and take collective action for their betterment. What cannot be achieved by a single woman in a patriarchal society can be achieved by a group which presses for common demands. This paper investigates, from a generally feminist position, how women in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

forge ties with each other which help them to fight for their rights, inscribe their lives and stories, and tide over the crises in their personal lives as well as the crises in their nation's history. However, in the socio-political milieu in which the novel is set, they are far from getting empowerment in the public sphere which is dominated by men.

Isabel Allende is an important Latin American writer of the twentieth century who is often said to be the female counterpart of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Born in 1942 in Lima, Peru, and raised in Chile, Allende worked as a journalist, playwright and children's writer. She was forced to leave Chile for Venezuela when her close relative Salvador Allende was deposed in a CIA-backed coup led by Pinochet in 1973. Apart from *The House of the Spirits* (1982) which became an international bestseller, she is the author of many novels like *Of Love and Shadows*, *The Infinite Plan*, *Paula*, *Eva Luna* and *The Island Beneath the Sea*. Like the works of other Latin American writers, Allende's works are based on relationships and events within families against the backdrop of the socio-cultural and political situation. Use of magic realism is a significant feature of her works.

Like Marquez, who scripted a monumental family saga in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Isabel Allende, in her *The House of the Spirits* (1982) records the histories of two families over a period of time and it is said to be based on her memories of her family when she was forced into exile in Venezuela after the socialist government of her uncle, Salvadore Allende was toppled by a military coup. Critics who have written on the novel like Sara E. Cooper, Peter G. Earle, Ruth Y. Jenkins, Z. Nelly Martinez, Lesley Mackay, and Gloria Duran have drawn attention to its narrative magic, its privileging of the female voice and experience, its emphasis on family systems and the place of women in them, the politics of the woman artist and the empowerment of the third world woman, the representation of women, feminism and freedom, and the use of magic realism. My paper aims to investigate mother-daughter relationships and bonding among women which is a significant feature of the novel although it has a male protagonist. The connection between generations of women belonging to two families helps them to inscribe their experiences in letters and notebooks and make them available for posterity. Women's stories tend to get sidelined or even erased in familial or official records, and informal writings like letters are a way of recovering their stories and according legitimacy and granting audience to their experiences.

Mother-daughter relationships have been particularly emphasized in French feminism. Patriarchal structures, which are the norm in most plac-

es, give importance to male (father-son, mother-son) genealogies. The French feminist Luce Irigaray, who is an exponent of a culture of sexual difference, says in her book *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Sexual Difference* that “patriarchal traditions have wiped out traces of mother-daughter genealogies”(17). To rectify the situation, she says:

In all homes and all public places, attractive images (not involving advertising) of the mother-daughter couple should be displayed. It's very damaging for girls always to be faced with representations of mother and son, especially in the religious dimension. I'd suggest to all Christian women, for example that they place an image depicting Mary and her mother Anne in their living room, in their daughters' room and in their own room. There are sculptures and easily reproducible paintings of them available. I'd also advise them to display photographs of themselves with their daughter(s), or maybe with their mother... The point of these representations is to give girls a valid representation of their genealogy, an essential condition for the constitution of their identity.(48)

Irigaray protests against the cultural erasure of women and suggests several measures including the formation of separate communities of women so that women's distinctiveness can be preserved and developed in patriarchal structures.

Mother-daughter relationship is of special significance in *The House of the Spirits*. Different generations of women in the del Valle family- Nivea, Clara, Blanca and Alba bond with each other and even physical distance cannot affect their intimacy as they communicate via the written word. Nivea, the only woman in the novel who shows an interest in affairs outside the home, bonds with Clara as if she were her only child although she has a number of other children “ creating a tie so strong that it continued into succeeding generations as a family tradition”(101). After the other children leave home on getting married or for attending to their jobs, Nivea spends a lot of time with her daughter Clara telling her stories of her family, specially her brothers:

All her life she would remember the afternoons spent in the company of her mother in the sewing room , where Nivea sewed clothing for the poor on her machine and told stories and anecdotes about the family. She would point to the daguerrotypes on the wall and tell Clara of the past. (99)

Clara also accompanies her mother when the latter goes out with her suffragette friends addressing meetings composed of working class women in a consciousness- raising drive.

Clara's marriage to Esteban Trueba separates her from her mother Nivea. A woman with extraordinary powers of clairvoyance, prophecy, and telepathy, Clara in her turn bonds with her daughter Blanca who however has none of her mother's other worldly concerns. They accept their differences and are able to laugh off their idiosyncracies. Esteban Trueba rues that his daughter never got close to him and did not have to fight the Electra Complex as she bonded naturally with her mother. Clara, with her mother's instinct, immediately senses that Blanca has an affair with somebody and takes her side when Esteban Trueba pulls up his daughter for her clandestine affair with the son of his foreman, Pedro Tercero Garcia who is a rebel accused of filling the heads of the tenants with new ideas regarding their rights. Clara tells Esteban Trueba that Tercero hasn't done anything that he himself had not done before. This enrages Esteban so much that he hits Clara and she in turn refuses to talk to her husband for the rest of her life. The rift between husband and wife widens, never to be bridged. Clara is never harsh with her daughter and protests against her husband's plan of forcing Blanca to marry the Frenchman Count de Satigny in order to grant legitimacy to the child to be born out of her union with the missing Pedro Tercero Garcia. Even when she is physically separated from her daughter, she shares every incident of her daily life with her through letters. After the confrontation with Esteban on the issue of Blanca's affair with Pedro Tercero Garcia, Clara leaves Tres Marias with daughter Blanca and both of them start a new life in the city in " the big house on the corner" (149) which Esteban built. It becomes a vibrant place with flowers and birds in beautiful cages cared for by the mother and daughter.

After the birth of Blanca's daughter Alba, Clara lavishes her love on her granddaughter and the legacy of intimacy among the women members of the Del Valle family is carried on.

Early in the novel we are introduced to the second family in the story- the Trueba family where we see a mother-daughter connection between Dona Ester and her daughter, Ferula. The son, Esteban Trueba does not have much emotional attachment with his bed-ridden mother and it is the daughter who attends to her till her death forcing her to turn down a few suitors and be alone after the death of her mother.

Women amongst Themselves

Women's bonding resulting in the formation of communities of women to further shared interests, promote empowerment, and for emotional support during times of crises whether personal or social, are of particular interest to feminism especially Radical Feminism and Lesbian Feminism. Nina Auerbach in her classic study *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (1998) studies literary representations of such communities and says that the communities which have exercised the literary imagination represent female self-sufficiency and "is a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men, attaining citizenship in the community of adulthood through masculine approval alone" (5).

Apart from the mother-daughter relationship, Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* focuses on other relationships among women. Esteban Trueba's sister Ferula is left alone after the death of her mother, but Clara takes a liking for her sister-in-law and provides her refuge in her own house where Ferula spends her time attending to the household chores and looking after Clara during her pregnancies and her periods of silences:

Ferula took her strolling in the sun, because it was good for the baby; shopping, so the child would lack for nothing when it was born and have the finest clothing in the world; for lunch at the golf club, 'so everyone would see how beautiful you have become since marrying my brother.' (120)

It is Ferula who takes care of Clara's children after they are born. The attachment between Clara and Ferula becomes the reason for the estrangement between brother and sister. The two had never been close from the beginning and Ferula always nursed the grievance of having to care for her mother alone, of being born a woman because if she had been born a man, she would have travelled and made fortunes like her brother. Ferula, afraid of being left alone, tries her best to be close to her sister-in-law and devises a thousand ways of keeping Esteban away from Clara. When her brother is away, Ferula controls the house, and this gives her a sense of agency and purpose as Clara does not concern herself much with household affairs, but when "he was in the house, she had to disappear into the shadows and be more prudent in the way she addressed the servants, as well as the care she lavished on Clara" (121). Esteban reads through Ferula's efforts, accuses her of "perverting his wife with her spinster caresses" and her arsenal of "lesbian arts" (157) and causing the rift between him and his wife. In a fit of rage, he turns her out of his house. Ferula leaves her

brother's house in despair and none of Clara's supernatural powers help her to find out the whereabouts of her sister-in-law. Ferula dies alone in poverty, but not before she curses Esteban that he too will suffer the same fate and find himself alone with a shriveled body. After her mother it is only about Clara that Ferula cares and it is Clara who supports her and seeks her out in her poor lodgings and gives her a burial.

The rituals and activities of running the household, managing marriages, pregnancies, childbirth, and illnesses bring women together naturally. The maid Nana devotes her entire life to the service of the del Valle and Trueba families - bringing up the children and attending to the numerous household chores. She is as devoted to Clara as she was to Clara's mother Nivea. She and Ferula compete with each other for a place in the children's affections and "fought for the right to care for Clara in her rantings and ravings" (151). Both of them knew that without Clara's and the children's patronage, they would be left destitute. Nana dies in a devastating earthquake with only the things belonging to the del Valle family lying by her side. The deaths of Nana and Ferula paralyse the household as without them, Clara finds it difficult to attend to the household chores. This testifies to the importance of women in the smooth running of families. Esteban is almost an outsider in his own household as it is Clara assisted by Nana and Ferula who manage the domestic affairs.

Clara's association with the Mora sisters is another instance of a community of women with shared interests. The Mora sisters are students of spiritualism and supernatural phenomena-a field of great interest to Clara herself. A deep bond develops between the women and they start to meet every Friday to call up spirits and discuss recipes and premonitions. They could transmit mental energy from "the big house on the corner" (149) where Clara lived to the other extreme of the city where the Mora sisters lived and this enabled them to give each other moral support in the difficult moments of their everyday lives. Clara's bonding with her daughter and granddaughter, her sister-in-law Ferula, the maid Nana and the Mora sisters are a resistance to the patriarchal control sought to be exercised on her by her husband Esteban Trueba who wants her to devote herself single-mindedly to him and disapproves of her closeness to other people and her other -worldly interests. Clara shakes off the weight of traditional expectations from a wife and pursues her interests till the end.

One does not see strong bonding among the men as one sees among the women. Esteban is close to nobody. He confesses that he loves Clara, but Clara does not care much about him except in the initial period of her

marriage. His children are distant from him and he has a master-tenant relationship with the peasants at Tres Marias. But he goes to clubs and gyms where he connects with other men and discusses politics. Women do not have clubs or associations which can initiate them to public life and make them useful members of the society. Apart from Nivea who does some organizational work among women and makes a mark in public life, most of the other women keep to the private sphere and pursue activities in keeping with traditional expectations from women- knitting, sewing, embroidery, and making artefacts. Clara's arena of activity is the spiritual sphere and she draws around her women with spiritual concerns like the Mora sisters.

In Latin America, long-standing gender norms have associated men with dominance and sexual aggression, while women are portrayed as weak, submissive, and requiring men's protection. In Chile, gender norms portray women primarily as political outsiders. Throughout Chile's history as a nation, whether women are seen as mothers, as housewives, or as feminists, they are all considered to belong outside the arena of politics. While gender stereotypes appear to be eternal and unchanging in Chile as in other Latin American countries, they are also continuously reconstituted and redefined, both by political elites and by ordinary men and women.

Thus, along with strict gender roles, Chile also has a long history of women fighting for their rights or protesting against particular oppressive regimes. Lisa Baldez in her book on the women's movements in Chile divides the history of the women's movement in that country into three phases. The first phase, in the beginning of the 20th century, is concerned, as in other parts of the world, with women's struggle for voting rights. Women formed associations to carry on their struggle till the vote was given to them in 1949. After the right to suffrage was won, there was a lull in the movement. In 1970, a democratically elected Socialist government under the leadership of Salvadore Allende took office amidst high hopes among the working class. The government of Allende strove to peacefully usher in socialism by introducing Marxist reforms, but the government faced numerous problems owing to anti-communist propaganda by the Right backed by the US and the CIA. There were acute food shortages and scarcity of essential commodities prompting women to take to the streets banging empty pots and plates and this marks the second phase in the women's movement in Chile. "The March of the Empty Pots" by women is an important event in the history of the Women's Movement in Chile although it has associations with women's relation to the domestic

sphere and food. After the fall of the Allende government, the Pinochet regime which took over after a military coup in 1973 put an end to socialist reforms by implementing a new order. The unspeakable atrocities unleashed by the Pinochet regime on communists in a reign of terror forced women to take to the streets again in what can be termed as the third phase in the women's movement. During the Pinochet regime, women organized around the slogan "Democracy in the Country and in the Home," punctuating the pro-democracy movement with demands for human rights, economic justice, and women's equality.

Although the Allende government and the Pinochet regime were vastly different, yet they represented an important feature in the patriarchal culture of Chile: the mobilization of women although they were political outsiders. A number of associations and unions of women like the Popular Front, the Movement for the Emancipation of Chilean Women, and the Chilean Women's Party were formed. Mothers Centres were opened to help women during times of scarcity and teach them arts and crafts to tide over their economic problems. Thus there has been a sisterhood of women in Chile for quite sometime and women evoked the founding heroines of Chile as they formed associations to promote their shared interests.

The novel interweaves family history with the history of the nation and women's role in different phases of this history. Chile, in the 1930s witnessed women's struggle for suffrage and Nivea's suffragette activities are in tune with this phase in the history of Chile. Nivea is said to be "the first feminist in the country" (146) and we are told of her visits with her daughter Clara and two or three of her suffragette friends to factories where she delivered speeches to the women who worked there. The difference in the outfits of the suffragette women who came from well-to-do backgrounds dressed in fur coats and boots and the resigned working class women with aprons and hands red with chilblains acquaints Clara for the first time with the iniquities in the social system. Although the patriarchs in the society strongly disapprove of Nivea's activities, Nivea is unfazed and has discussions with her suffragette friends on various topics including women's dress:

She had often discussed this with her suffragette friends and they had all agreed that until women shortened their dresses and their hair and stopped wearing corsets, it made no difference if they studied medicine or had the right to vote, because they would not have the strength to do it, but she herself was not brave enough to be among the first to give up the fashion. (17)

Nivea also visited slums and distributed food and clothing among the poor with her friends.

The deposition of President Salvadore Allende and the subsequent horrors of the Pinochet regime have been dealt with by Isabel Allende. Women suffered in a myriad ways in the reign of terror unleashed by the Pinochet regime. The politics of the nation catches up with the Trueba family. Blanca is sent away to Canada along with Pedro Tercero Garcia who is wanted by the Pinochet regime for his communist activities and the bond between Blanca and her daughter, Alba snaps for the first time. Alba is left alone with her grandfather. The spiritual connection among the Mora sisters and Clara is testified by the sudden visit, at the direction of the dead Clara, of one of the Mora sisters Luisa Mora, to warn Esteban Trueba and Alba of terrible things about to happen to Alba and to suggest that Alba be sent abroad to escape that fate. Esteban Trueba dismisses the prediction but is taken aback when it proves to be true and Alba is suddenly taken away by the police, blindfolded to extract information about Miguel who is a communist guerrilla. In the prison she is subjected to unspeakable tortures including rape and other indignities which leave her broken physically and mentally. Esteban Garcia inflicts all kinds of pain on her more to settle personal scores rather than to get information about Miguel. She is put in a doghouse, "a small, sealed cell like a dark, frozen, airless tomb" (469), is wounded both in body and spirit and thinks that death would be a blessing in comparison to what she is going through in life. But in the darkest hour of her life, she is comforted by the spirit of her grandmother who encourages her not to give up, to live and not die. It is Clara who tells her to take notes in her mind to keep it occupied and write her terrible story so that the world gets to know about the reign of terror taking place while they are leading comfortable lives in their homes. Her life, in other words, has a purpose. It is at Clara's instance that she starts writing the incredible story of her family across generations.

The support that women give to each other in prison shows the solidarity among the women. In prison, Alba meets Ana Diaz with whom she studied at the university. Ana Diaz is described as "an indomitable woman. She had withstood every form of cruelty" (467). She is raped in the presence of her lover and loses the child she was carrying because of police beatings. That did not kill her spirit, nor did she forget to smile or to hope. Ana and Alba comfort each other and Ana looks after Alba and gives her courage although she herself is going through immense trauma. The women try to alleviate each other's pain by singing songs and hymns in chorus. Their voices break the silence of the prison and this may be a

gesture of resistance to the atrocities of the regime by the women who are powerless to protest in any other way. Their voices are an affirmation of life and hope in the midst of the oppression let loose by the Pinochet regime - " Ana and Alba sang with the strength of their despair, and female voices rose from the other cells. Then the prisoners would stand up tall, straighten their backs, and turn their heads in the direction of the women's cells..." (468).

Alba is also put in a concentration camp for women where she finds herself in a sun-filled courtyard with many women who were singing the Ode to Joy just for her. The women laid her on the camp bed and explained the rules of the community to her - that as she is sick, she would not have to wash or sew, but would have to help the children. Alba, for the first time felt reassured in the company of so many women who lavished their love, tenderness and care on her, never leaving her alone, helping her, from their own experience, to get over her trauma and bad memories. "Don't think about Miguel," they told me, they insisted. "You mustn't think about your loved ones or about the world that lies beyond these walls. It's the only way to survive" (483).

Ana Diaz, who is also in the concentration camp, gives her a notebook and asks her to write as that will get her pain out, help her to heal and join them in their singing and sewing. Ana puts the pencil in her hands and the other women join her when weakness and agony make Alba throw the notebook away - "the women did not leave me alone. They shook me, made me work, made me tell stories to the children. They changed my bandage with great care and put the paper in front of me" (484). The women take care of Alba's food, make her eat a little more than the others, remind her that she is not the only woman who has been raped and that she has to forget the experience. The women sing at the top of their voices and the guards who insult them as whores are not able to prevent them from singing.

In the concentration camp, there are women with children. Some of the women are not in their normal senses on account of the traumatic experiences and are not in a position to look after their children so much so that they have to be looked after by other women including Alba, who feed them like their own, tell them stories, and sing lullabies to put them to sleep.

Alba manages to come out of the prison due to the efforts of her grandfather who is helped by Transito Soto to secure Alba's release. When she

leaves the concentration camp, the last thing she hears is the voice of her women friends singing to give her courage the way they did when all the women arrived or left the camp. Alba says " I wept as I walked. I had been happy there" (485). Suffering thus brings women together and makes them support and stand by each other.

Conclusion

Women thus play a pivotal role in the novel. At a time when the public world was dominated by men with women still struggling for their rights like the right to franchise, the latter were at the receiving end of the power struggles and the resultant violence which are perhaps inevitable when there are competing ideologies and a new modernity asserting itself against entrenched socio-cultural beliefs in a setting as prone to natural disasters as to political and social upheavals. Women living in such tumultuous times sought to protect themselves by connecting with each other whether within the family or outside it, cultivating their interests which are sometimes wayward as in the case of Clara, and preserving their memories in letters and notebooks, thus scripting an incredible story of solidarity and resilience among women. Though without access to political power, women in the novel sustain themselves by fostering relationships and resist domination and repression of all kinds by bonding with each other, and though helpless in stopping atrocities, they stand together and show their united defiance of forces of tyranny and destruction.

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