

Gender and the Heroine: Reflections on Female Roles in Selected Works of Isabel Allende

H.J. DeVrou

Spanish Department
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI USA
holly.j.devrou@wmich.edu

Abstract—Growing up in the suppressive patriarchal environment of her grandfather's home, Chilean author Isabel Allende soon realized that the life of woman, when compared to that of a man, was unfair. Women had all of the obligations and none of the rights and men were able to do as they pleased. As an adult she began telling stories of strong women who were able masters of their own destinies in spite of living in an oppressive environment. One of the ways in which these women were able to shape their lives is through their sexuality. The women in Allende's novels are sensual and sexual beings who do not believe the sole purpose of sex to be to conceive a child. The women in her stories desire carnal pleasure rather than solely thinking of sex in terms of procreation.

This paper examines these female characters that wish to define themselves by disregarding social norms and actively seeking passionate intimacy. In this way, Isabel Allende shows that women do not have to adhere to the strict social guidelines of purity and a life of self-sacrifice in order to find happiness. Three of Allende's books are discussed: *Hija de la Fortuna*, *Retrato en Sepia*, and *Eva Luna*. Here patterns of sexual activity help the women examine themselves, sparking revelations of inner strength and beauty.

Keywords—Isabel Allende; Latin American Literature; Women's Empowerment; Gender; Sex

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of her first novel, *La Casa de los Espiritus* in 1985, Chilean author Isabel Allende has empowered women through her writings, especially in Latin America where most countries continue to be characterized by *machismo* and *marianismo*. Women in these countries are consistently thought of as being inferior to men, and are treated as such. Allende's portrayal of women as sensual beings is a stark contrast to the *marianismo* notion that women should abstain from sexual relations unless intending to conceive a child. The women in her stories choose to pursue carnal pleasure rather than restrict themselves solely to procreation.

This paper examines a pageantry of female characters that wish to shape their own destinies by discarding threats of social taboos and pursuing levels of passionate intimacy. In this way, Isabel Allende shows that women do not have to remain pure and docile to maintain their sense of self. Three of Allende's books are discussed: *Hija de la Fortuna*, *Retrato en Sepia*, and *Eva Luna*. Here patterns of sexual activity spark the women to examine themselves, fostering revelations of inner strength and beauty. Their sexual

relationships also serve as catalysts, evoking some form of life-altering change. This change may be as complex as emotional self-discovery or as simple as a newfound physical gratification. Though this quest for change separates them from their previous lives, it also gives them the opportunity to explore themselves and gain empowerment.

Isabel Allende has long fought to improve the rights and lives of women. Her foundation works toward the "empowerment of woman and girls and the protections of women and children" (www.isabelallendefoundation.org). She also readily contributes financially to charities and missions worldwide that assist women with "reproductive self-determination, healthcare, education and protections from violence, exploitation, and/or discrimination" (www.isabelallendefoundation.org).

Her feminist views influenced her actions even before she began writing fiction. While working translating romance novels in Chile, she was fired after it was discovered she would change the text in order to make the female characters appear more intelligent and independent [1]. For much of her life, Allende regretted being born a female. After her parents divorced, she went with her mother and siblings to live in her grandfather's home. In this very patriarchal environment, the only way a woman could get any attention was to fall ill. She watched as her mother had all the obligations and none of the rights and was not permitted to do anything without her grandfather's consent. Allende herself was forced to take care of her brothers and clean up after them while they played outside. At the age of five, young Isabel began to realize that life for a woman was unfair and she began to wish she were a man [2].

It wasn't until, in 1988 at age 40, she wrote *Eva Luna* and began to understand she had no reason to be jealous of the male gender. She had done many things that a man could do and had a very successful life. She still committed herself to aiding those women who were not as fortunate as she was, but her opinion of the male and female genders had been altered [3]. Eroticism is a common thread in many of Allende's books. She herself is willing to openly discuss sex in interviews, saying that if she were not writing, she would be making love [4].

II. HIJA DE LA FORTUNA

In any event, the first book in the trilogy, *Hija de la Fortuna*, follows the story of Eliza Sommers as she grows up in 19th century Chile. Eliza is raised by Jeremy and Rose Sommers, two siblings that arrived in Valparaiso after

leaving England and found Eliza on their doorstep. The young Chilena is brought up in a suppressive environment with Miss Rose attempting to make her in to a proper and submissive young woman (and at times threatening to send her to live in an orphanage run by Papist nuns). For his part, Jeremy Sommers is very concerned with appearances and says that the “*destino de la mujer es preservar los valores morales y la buena conducta* [the destiny of a woman is to preserve moral values and good conduct]” [5]. He will not permit Eliza to do anything that does not adhere to these strict guidelines. However, all of the “proper conduct and morals” disappear when she encounters Joaquín Andieta,

Joaquín Andieta is employed by Jeremy Sommers at the *Compañía Británica de Importación y Exportación* [British Company of Import and Export] when they first meet. While it takes him a second look to notice her, Eliza is head over heels in love immediately. She remembers “*cuando vio las manos de largos dedos manchados de tinta de Joaquín Andieta y oyó su voz profunda, pero también clara y fresca como rumor de río...se sintió conmovida hasta los huesos y un deseo tremendo de acercarse y olerlo la obligó a salir de su escondite tras las palmas de un gran macetero* [when she saw the long ink-stained fingers of Joaquín Andieta’s hands and heard his voice, which was deep but fresh and clear like the sound of a river...she felt moved to her bones and a tremendous desire to get close and smell him forced her out of hiding behind a large potted palm]” [6]. She is so completely in love with Joaquin that it makes her physically ill and she is confined to bed for quite some time. Miss Rose is able to identify that her adopted daughter, Eliza, is in love with Joaquin and she is very disturbed because it interferes with her plans to find her a suitable husband of high social standing. She tries to occupy all of the young girl’s time in order to keep her from seeing Andieta, but her efforts are futile. Eliza and Joaquin soon begin a physical relationship.

Allende is not afraid to be explicit with her description of the sexual activity that occurs in her novels. When Eliza and Joaquin have sex for the first time, the author describes them discovering each other by “*pusieron esto aquí y aquello allá* [they put this here and that there]” [7]. Here Eliza is able to liberate herself from the constraints of her oppressive family life. She separates herself from reality and sees herself only in the moment with her lover. Nothing else exists for the two of them; they are beyond fear and oppression. In this first sexual experience, Eliza is able to begin her journey of self-discovery that takes her halfway around the world.

One of the consequences of such free and uninhibited lovemaking is a child and soon Eliza finds herself pregnant with Joaquin’s child. Not long before she discovers this fact Joaquin leaves Chile to discover gold in California. Her decision to follow him to the United States is primarily motivated by a love of the man and a desire to have a family with him. However, as her life progresses, we see that she becomes less interested in finding her lover and more interested in finding herself. She is able to do much more than she would have been able to had she not spent those Wednesday nights with Joaquin. While it can be argued that had she not miscarried the child she was carrying on the boat during her journey to California she would not have been as

free as she was otherwise; it can also be reasonably speculated that had she remained in Chile, she would have been restricted to the traditional roles of wife and mother. By the same token, had she not left Valparaiso, she would not have eventually married Tao Chi’en and had his children. In the meantime, she traveled across much of the West disguised as a man and experienced events she could never have imagined back home.

III. RETRATO EN SEPIA

Allende’s second book in the del Valle trilogy follows the story of Eliza in her later years, and that of her granddaughter, Aurora. *Retrato en Sepia* takes place once again in the United States and later Chile and predominately focuses on Aurora. In this novel Isabel uses sex in a different, though equally liberating way. Aurora falls in love with who she believes to be the “perfect man.” Diego Dominguez was the son of a wealthy known family that asks to dance with Aurora at a celebration of the Chilean Independence Day. Looking back, Aurora understands that he was never in love with her, but being young and naïve, she willingly accepted his marriage proposal soon after they met. The first night they spent as husband and wife was a disaster according to Aurora. The passion that she expected was notably lacking and the physical pain of intercourse left her with a desire to escape her marriage and return to the life she had had with her grandmother. She complains that “*para el hombre el sexo era fácil – podía obtenerlo incluso a la fuerza – mientras que nosotras era sin deleite y con graves consecuencias* [for a man sex was easy – he can even get it through force – meanwhile for us it was without delight and with grave consequences]” [8]. Though she was a virgin, she still understood that lovemaking should be pleasurable for both the man and woman. It was apparent that the encounter with Diego was purely a mechanical sexual activity rather than the passionate lovemaking that she had envisioned having with her husband.

Aurora soon learns why the sexual relations with Diego were not at all gratifying; he was already passionately involved with a woman he loved, and only because of spousal obligations did he engage in sexual relations with Aurora. The fact that Diego was in love with his brother’s wife, Susana, and became apparent the night Aurora found her husband and sister-in-law making love in a horse stable. She then realized that the passion and pleasure that the lovers shared was something that she knew she would never experience with her husband. The sterile, loveless sex act that Aurora and Diego had was nothing compared to the “*amor voluptuosamente...sin prisa como si tuvieran el resto de la vida por adelante* [voluptuous love...slowly as if they had the rest of their lives ahead]” [9]. She felt betrayed, lost and afraid, because she knew that the marital vows she had taken were meant to last forever, and her hope that eventually she and Diego would grow to love each other passionately was gone forever. Now she had a decision to make. Should she stay in a loveless marriage because she was bound to it by vows; or should she leave and suffer the stigma of living as a “separated woman?” Her decision to stay, out of obligation to Diego’s mother Elvira, is thwarted

when her grandmother falls ill, and she decides to return to Chile, where she remains after Eliza's death.

Shortly thereafter, Aurora falls in love again, but this time it is very different, as she embraces the depth of passionate richness with her grandmother's physician, Iván Radovic. Perhaps because now she is able to be independent and self-sufficient, she fully enjoys a relationship with a man that is not tasked with being her sole means of support. This is a consistent theme in Allende's feminist literature: suppression of feminine independence, intellectual awakening, emancipation through "illicit love", and lastly, fulfillment. Regardless, the two lovers are able to "separarnos por unos días y volvernos a juntar cuando nos vence la nostalgia de los besos [separate ourselves for days and come together when overcome by the nostalgia of kisses]" [10]. A much stronger Aurora appears during this period, and this certainly would not have happened had she not experienced Diego's betrayal, for this served as a catalyst to her search for empowerment. She says that if Iván were to betray her in the same manner as Diego, "no me consumiría el llanto, como entonces, sino que lo mataría sin el menor remordimiento [my cries would not consume me, as they did then, but I would kill him without the slightest regret]" [11]. Aurora is able to pursue her passion – photography – without the permission of her husband; yet she also is able to have the fulfilling and loving relationship she desires, marked by rich passionate and pleasurable lovemaking. Here Aurora realizes she can have a profound and fervent relationship with a man while still maintaining her independence and self-identity.

IV. EVA LUNA

Eva Luna came in to the world in a very disadvantageous position. She was born the illegitimate daughter of a poor woman who had been orphaned as a child and raised by missionaries. Her father was an unknown indigenous man that had once worked briefly as a gardener at the house where her mother was a maid. At the age of six, when her mother died, her godmother put her to work to earn a living. After several years it appeared that the life of a maid is not for her so she runs away. She meets a boy named Humberto Naranjo who sees to it that she is cared for; he helps her find a place to stay living with a woman who owns a brothel and a transvestite living life as a woman. However after the police raid the brothel, Eva is once again on her own.

As is common with many of Isabel Allende's protagonists, Eva experiences sex with different partners before finding her true love. Her first such experience was with Riad Halabí, the Turkish man she worked for as both a maid and a store clerk. His wife had recently committed suicide and though Eva was initially charged with her murder, she was soon released from jail Riad knew that she could not stay in his home. The night before she left, she realizes the profound love that she has for him; a mixture of a love that daughter has for her father, and a love that one has for a lover. She describes their intimacy as something

"que resultó alegre y risueño...Riad Halabí era sabio y tierno y esa noche me dio tanto placer que habrían de pasar muchos años y varios hombres por mi vida antes que volviera a sentirme tan plena [that was happy and smiley...Riad Halabí was wise and tender and gave me so much pleasure that it would take many years and several men in my life to feel that full again]" [12]. The Turk also teaches her about her own body and femininity. Their lovemaking was so intense that Eva cannot imagine her life without Riad and begs him to let her stay. The Turk refuses, saying she needs to escape the small town where they live and the aggressive nature of the police captain who demands constant bribes to keep Eva out of jail for the "murder" of Riad's wife. The plan was to send her to a young ladies boarding house to live safely and go to school to learn a vocation. However, as she boarded the bus that would take her to the capital, she realized that her life needed to change. She had lived her life up to that point, "a las ordenes de otros, hambrienta de afecto sin más futuro que el día de la mañana y sin más fortunas que [sus] historias [by the orders of others, starved for affection, with no more of a future than that day and no more fortune than her stories]" [13]. The physical and emotional relations that she shared with Riad during their five years together helped her to realize her own self worth. As the bus departed she says just one word out loud to herself, "basta [enough]" and throws the boarding house information out the window [14].

V. CONCLUSION

These three women all conform to the model that Allende establishes in her novels. At the beginning of their respective stories, they lead sheltered and repressed lives surrounded by those that would have them submit to the marianismo ideals that characterize Latin American societies. They are destined to follow traditional paths, becoming "only" wives and mothers with little hope of real independence. Their destinies change however, when they fall in love with the men with whom they share their first intimate sexual experiences. Aurora del Valle's experience is a bit different in that her first sexual experience with Diego is not nearly as pleasurable as those of Eliza and Eva. However it is this unpleasant experience that begins to free Aurora from her environment and allow her to dedicate herself more to her creative expression. After living through these experiences, these women embark on journeys of self-discovery, which inevitably help them become independent and empowered on their own terms, not the ones defined for them by society.

Upon reflection, the revolutionary sexual ideas that Allende was promoting in her novels have both negative as well as positive consequences. In countries characterized by both marianismo and Catholicism, a sexual revolution of sorts does not usually include safe sexual practices. Without sound education devoted to safe sex, including monogamy and condom use, women that experience their newly found sexual freedom are at an increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS. The Catholic

Church's stance on birth control further complicates things, as the use of artificial birth control methods, including condoms, is not condoned, and for women that have grown up in countries characterized by Catholicism, condoms may not only be difficult to obtain, it also may be difficult for women to encourage their lovers to use them. The end result has been a marked increase in sexually transmitted diseases among women. For example, according to the World Health Organization, in Allende's native Chile in 1990 there were approximately 3,000 people living with HIV/AIDS. By the year 2000, just ten years later that number had risen to approximately 23,000 people [15]. In Mexico, one of Latin America's largest countries, those living with AIDS went from 70,000 to 170,000 in the same time period [16].

Of course increased sexual activity is not the sole reason for this increase. Intravenous drug use in Latin America was also on the rise during this time. Also in Mexico homosexual men saw the largest increase of newly infected individuals; however, greater sexual liberation, especially among females, in countries that do not readily advocate the use of birth control and condom, does appear to contribute to a higher rate of infection.

Despite these negative consequences, Isabel Allende has broken barriers built by societies characterized by machismo and marianismo. Her literature has helped to smooth the progress of change in societies where women are historically oppressed and mistreated. Twenty years ago, most women in Latin America were forced to choose between being married and having children, or entering the religious life. Today, women are able to choose careers for themselves and currently make up about one third of the workforce in Latin America. Women are even taking to the streets to promote equal rights, as is demonstrated by the Woman's March in Oaxaca, Mexico. The changes that have been made in terms of woman's rights in Latin America have indeed been remarkable, and "rule-breakers" such as Allende have helped to facilitate them. Though grand social changes are never

easy, and do come with drawbacks, Latin American women are in a better position socially now that they were two decades ago. Writers and activists such as Allende have fueled this societal shift.

REFERENCES

- [1] A. Alter, "Isabel Allende on superstition and memory: a new novel conjures Haiti's slave uprising and a path to America," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2010.
- [2] C. Dreifus, "Isabel Allende on erotic recipes, love and grief, writing, and life," *Ms. Arlington*, vol.8, Mar/Apr 1998, p. 38.
- [3] E. Crystall, J. Kuhnheim, M. Layoun, I. Allende, "An interview with Isabel Allende," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 33, No. 4, Winter 1992, pp. 585-600.
- [4] L. Richards, "Isabel Allende interview," *January Magazine*, November 1999.
- [5] I. Allende, *Hija de la Fortuna*. New York, NY: Harper Libros, 1999, p. 21.
- [6] I. Allende, *Hija de la Fortuna*. New York, NY: Harper Libros, 1999, p. 92.
- [7] I. Allende, *Hija de la Fortuna*. New York, NY: Harper Libros, 1999, p. 125.
- [8] I. Allende, *Retrato en Sepia*. Barcelona, Spain: Plaza & Janés Editores, 2000, p. 260.
- [9] I. Allende, *Retrato en Sepia*. Barcelona, Spain: Plaza & Janés Editores, 2000, p. 294.
- [10] I. Allende, *Retrato en Sepia*. Barcelona, Spain: Plaza & Janés Editores, 2000, p. 314.
- [11] I. Allende, *Retrato en Sepia*. Barcelona, Spain: Plaza & Janés Editores, 2000, p. 315.
- [12] I. Allende, *Eva Luna*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988, p. 189.
- [13] I. Allende, *Eva Luna*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988, p. 191.
- [14] I. Allende, *Eva Luna*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988, p. 192.
- [15] World Health Organization, "Epidemiological fact sheet on HIV / AIDS: core data on epidemiology and response, Chile," December 2008.
- [16] World Health Organization, "Epidemiological fact sheet on HIV/AIDS: Core data on epidemiology and response, Mexico," December 2008.