

*Literature As An Endeavor to Understand The
Nuances of a Living Culture
Within a given Society: The Case of Isabel
Allende's House of the Spirits*

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Abstract

Literature offers us a window on the worlds and cultures of authors who, like us, experience life's richness and pain, but who, perhaps unlike us, have noticed the moments we overlook in our hurry to move on. For some writers and poets, literature serve as an escape from life. The contemporary literature has become more reader centered and the emphasis is laid upon economic, material, cultural and environmental conditions of man. It was believed that the philosophical doctrines supply materials to literature, but in the modern age, it is considered as an account of the changes in the social structure caused by industrialism, capitalism, communism and totalitarianism. Besides, writers transport the real-life events in their society into fiction and present it to the society as a mirror with which people can look at themselves and make amends where necessary, as it is the case for the Latino American writer, Isabel Allende. She writes with the heart of a true romantic but also with an acute sensitivity to social and political conditions. She brings dramatic qualities of romance and struggle, and artfully weaves the infamous "magic realism" genre that is often found in Latin American literature into her writings. The present article aims at presenting literature as a social art transcends human limitation , enriches life and gives readers a kind of social and cultural perspectives that they otherwise may be beneficial for them.

Key words: Culture, Fiction, Life, Literature , Society

1. Introduction

Literature reflects the various experiences, ideas, passions of human beings in their daily life that are expressed in several forms and styles of literary works .It can increase our knowledge and experiences about human problems including values, morals, cultures, and human interests. After reading a literary work, the reader may get a certain impression of what he/she has read. Literary texts have been variously described as reflecting the economics, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, and religion of the society that produced the texts. Most people are familiar with an at least implicit reflection perspective from journalistic social commentary. A writer is not an isolated fact but the product of the age in which s/he lives and works. His / her picture of life is pervaded with the influence of the culture of his /her society.

2. Literature as an instrument that stimulates the knowledge of the Society's Culture

Readers see a world through the author's eye, observing human values and different kinds of living. They become more productive and adventurous when they perceive the richness and the diversity of the language. Literature enables readers to immerse themselves in the story by turning their world into a cultural island where they can interact with the text, share different viewpoints about the settings, the style and the language. According to Vladamir Nabakov (1899,1977) , in exploring ideas about what literature is, it is useful to look at some of the "things" that literature does. Literature is something that reflects society, makes us think about ourselves and our society, allows us to enjoy language and beauty, it can be didactic, and it reflects on "the human condition". Researchers as Myonghee (2004) , Morgan(1996), Edmondson (1995/6) have recognized the benefits of using literature in three core areas: First, literature is beneficial to language development. Second, literature enhances the

knowledge of culture and society which is too complicated to be captured by any single piece of expository writing. Third, literature fosters critical thinking by offering readers multiple perspectives especially with issues such as immigration, cultural differences, social upheavals . Thus, literature explores and reflects conflicts in the culture itself, conflicts in the values and ideas of the culture, the conflict of social groups (ethnic, racial, class, gender, religious and so forth). In addition to that, it offers a sense of identity and community, by establishing and founding narratives, which capture the essence of what typifies a given culture or community, or by dramatizing those particular stories and images, which give the culture a sense of common meaning and purpose. Culture, offers an interdisciplinary field that includes artistic discourses, social conventions, and reflexive impacts.

3.Allende's Experience with Society and its Culture

Many authors as the Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927,2014), the Mexican Laura Esquivel (1950) and the Panamanian Jose Luis Rodriguez Pitt (1971) draw from their life experiences to write captivating books full of memorable characters as in Garcia's One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) Esquivel's Like Water For Chocolate (1989) and Luis Rodriguez's Panamá Blues (2010). They describe true historical events to provide a backdrop to a story or to provide the emphasis to the story itself. Literature, as an imitation of human action, often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. In literature, we find stories designed to portray human life and action through some characters who, by their words, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment. Thus, literature is not only a reflection of the society but also acts as a corrective mirror in which members of the society can look at themselves and find the need for positive change. Literature actually reflects the society, it projects the virtues or the "good" values in the society for the people to imitate. As a sample , the Latino

American society has enlightened the world with its culture and art in addition to the European, African , Asian and American ones.

It is said that as a painter uses paint, as a musician uses musical instruments, as a sculptor uses stone-and-chisel. So a writer uses words as they have a definite meaning. That is the first point every writer must address. An example of a writer whose writings describe and portray the social and the cultural heritage of the society is Isabel Allende (1942) a Chilean author who wrote *The House of the Spirits (La casa de los espíritus 1982)*. Allende was known as being the first South American female writer to reach an audience on a global scale. She tells the stories of South American women (Hart, Patricia, 1989) and their fight against the harsh system, using Magic Realist techniques the incorporation of the supernatural and the fantastic into an otherwise familiar reality. The book made a great success in the world of literature. The author calls her writing style "realistic literature", rooted in her remarkable upbringing and the mystical people and events that fueled her imagination," She also explains that her work is equally informed by her feminist convictions, her commitment to social justice, and the harsh political realities that shaped her destiny." (Pérez Torres 2000).

The House of the Spirits explores the tumultuous political climate of Allende's native Chile, something that she can speak about with authority, as the ousted uncle Salvador Allende Chile's first socialist president in 1970 who committed suicide in 1973 during the U.S.-funded military coup by Augusto Pinochet, Chilean dictator (The Guardian 2013), written and first published in Spanish in 1982, *The House of the Spirits* looks at Chile through the eyes of four generations of the de Valle and Trueba families. The novel particularly focuses on women and engages themes of magical realism, including the character Clara who has psychic powers. Clara draws attention from around the

countryside for her ability to dish out curses and call spirits to her. This novel received enormous critical and popular acclaim and, in 1985, was translated into English. In 1993, it was released as a film with a star-studded cast.

Many elements in *The House of the Spirits* are based on Allende's own life. The political events in the unnamed country in the novel are quite similar to those that occurred in Chile. As Allende later explained, many of the characters in *The House of the Spirits* are based on members of her own family. Clara was a young girl when her family arrives at the del Valle house. Her favorite sister, Rosa the Beautiful, is engaged to Esteban Trueba. Clara is clairvoyant and is able to predict almost every event in her life. Yet, she is not able to change the future, only to see it. While Esteban is off in the mines trying to make his fortune, Rosa is accidentally poisoned in the place of her father, Severo del Valle. Rosa dies. Clara is so shocked by the events that she stops talking. Nine years later, Esteban has made a fortune with his family property, Tres Marias, thanks to his hard work and to his exploitation of the local peasants. On top of exploiting their labor, Esteban exploits all of the young girls of the peasant families, for his sexual satisfaction. Esteban's mother is about to die, and he returns to the city, where he pays a visit to the del Valle home. Esteban and Clara become engaged and marry. They move into the great house on the corner that Esteban built for them.

Probably, *The House of the Spirits* began as a letter Allende wrote to a dying uncle. However, *The House of the Spirits* is a novel, full of strong women's personality, both at home and outside of it who fought for their own identities and culture. Allende's novel illustrates seminal issues regarding the role of women in a specific patriarchal society, how women are empowered in the book, and what particular feminism is reflected in this mixture of fiction and history. Isabel Allende makes it rather clearer that Clara, the female protagonist who communicates with the spirits and is clairvoyant, perceives her own fate in the death of the older sister who was to have married the man who ultimately becomes Clara's own husband. Allende is considered as the first successful woman novelist of Latin America who actually

makes a living out of writing and she is a part of the Latin American “feminist literary awakening.” (Hart, Patricia 1989) History, culture and her own familial legends have influenced and inspired the way she writes about her experiences. Historically, Latin American social institutions and the political realm have been in conflict with the superimposed image of women being only “nurturing and passive.” (Hart, Patricia 1989). Allende’s feminine perspective writings, however, deal with politics, history, and social institutions in a way that is all but passive.

Conclusion

Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and ills. In its “corrective” function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues of good values in the society for people to emulate. Literature, as an imitation of human action, often presents a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. In literature, we find stories designed to portray human life and action through some characters who, by their words, culture, action and reaction, convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment. What writers of literature do is to transport the real-life events in their society into fiction and present it to the society as a mirror with which people can look at themselves and make amends where necessary. Therefore , literature opens the door for readers to increase their knowledge of the target culture as they can contemplate and critically comment on people’s way of life, values, attitudes, and beliefs. Yet , literature finds a soul mate in society, and they are inserted in culture.

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