

Isabel Allende: *Carnalismo* and Female Identity

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Abstract

This article proposes a comparative study of two novels, *The House of the Spirits* (1982) and *Portrait in Sepia* (2000) by Chilean author, Isabel Allende. In an attempt to represent various facets of Latin American female identity, this article uses *carnalismo* as recurring trope while reinstating the particular marginalized positions of these women as a subversive discourse altogether. These women do not rewrite, refashion or expropriate stories merely to satisfy some game-playing or some totalizing impulse. Instead, they juxtapose what we think we know of the past with alternative representations. The running argument in the article is therefore based on a celebration of subversive forms of patriarchy that rule untraditional domestic spaces. Furthermore, different storytelling formulations by the same author reflect certain trends in contemporary narrative, namely the ways in which narratives can turn one's attention away from an aesthetic past towards a more broadly conceived sense of history as textually mediated and constructed. To this end, theoretical frameworks of *carnalismo* suggest a desire to attract attention to unequal power relations and a consequent desire to celebrate these women.

Keywords: *Allende, feminism, Latin American literature, magical realism, narrative, postmodernism.*

**For correspondences and reprints*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article analyses two of Isabel Allende's Allende's family chronicles, *The House of the Spirits* (1982) and *Portrait in Sepia* (2000), where a form of female *carnalismo* works in parallel with magical realism. Since 1955, the term 'magical realism' has been used with increasing frequency to describe post-World War II Latin American fiction. Seymour Menton associates the term's juxtaposition of 'magic' and 'realism' with the psychological-philosophical ideas of Carl Jung and suggests that the term 'captures the artists' and the authors' efforts to portray the strange, the uncanny, the eerie and the dreamlike – but not the fantastic – aspects of everyday reality' (Menton, 1983: 9, 13). As noted by Menton (1983), the term is particularly associated with certain Central and Latin American novelists like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende.

Carnalismo can be roughly translated to mean a sisterhood or brotherhood (Gaspar de Alba, 2004; Chappell, 2005; Romero, 2005). But the word also carries a strong material sensibility. So being a *carnal* or *carnala* means being part of an extended family or *la familia* which affirms presence within the family and anticipates loyalty (Pineda-Madrid, 2002: 250-251). Formerly, *carnalismo* silenced and cut off dimensions of Latin American womanhood. Thus *la familia* implied a tacit acceptance of male dominance. Sexual equality was not a priority. In Allende's novels, however, the presence of powerful matriarchs collapses an old worldview of male leadership. Magical realism provides an opportunity to reinterpret these women's lives toward an emancipatory goal.

The House of the Spirits (1982) and *Portrait in Sepia* (2000) display instances of untraditional domestic contexts where unspoken matriarchy becomes a source of endurance and mutation. The notions of *carnalismo* and magical realism, both anchoring issues, play a potent and pervasive role in shaping the subversive storytelling of the women concerned. The merging of these two issues results in a particular type of storytelling, where the ability to bear an abundance of meaning is such that any explanation of their meaning is ultimately insufficient. This article therefore argues that the emancipatory self-understanding amongst the

women in these ‘multigenerational’ (Roof, 1996: 283) texts depends on the relationship between *carnalismo* and magical realism.

Retaining *la familia*, the traditional and usually patriarchal domestic space, as centre of storytelling for these women, Allende’s storytellers provide a liberating women-only basis for personal and direct relationships which are bound to nature, to earth and to procreation. In an interview, Isabel Allende’s comment highlights the relevance of the little narrative of the woman and of issues that largely dominate her novels:

I see a more feminine world, a world where feminine values will be validated, the same as masculine values are. A more integrated world. I see that in future, things that we have lost in the past will be recovered. There’s a search for those things, a search for spirituality, for nature, for the goddess religions, for family and human bonding. (Baldock and Bernstein, 1994)

For Jeanette Rodriguez (2002), the contribution of the Latin American woman is unique. Qualified as ‘the foundation of the family, pillar of [the] community, preserver of the culture and transmitter of the faith’, the Latin American woman is posited as particularly suited to lead *la familia* and community forward (Rodriguez, 2002: 114).

Allende’s family saga novels, therefore, provide an appropriate context in which a particular type of female self is manifest and lives out faith. Unspoken matriarchal systems in these novels depict an unusual form of commitment expressed through woman-to-woman empathy, childbirth, psychological connections and leadership. Constantly challenged to define themselves, their desires and assets, these female storytellers organize their roles around a vibrant challenging matriarchy.

To highlight the effects of female *carnalismo*, the narratives of the various women transcend reality’s boundaries with magical realism. Various articulated as an ‘irreducible’ element of magic, detailed descriptions of a

realistic world, contradictory understandings of events (Faris, 1995: 167-174), magical realism involves the near merging of two worlds or realms and a questioning of received ideas of time, space and identity. When Allende's female storytellers use these magical elements to put forward the unrepresentable, the aim is to enhance the subversive qualities of these women. The emancipatory agenda for these storytelling women is enhanced by an array of narrative styles that explore the constantly changing ontologies of subject formation.

Female *carnalismo* in *The House of the Spirits* (1982), for example, is signalled by the collective presence of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters in one building and by the fact that their storytelling normally takes place within that same house. While these storytellers draw readers in with hints of unspecified secrets, they are not necessarily committed to disclosing everything. Several times, the reader is left in a state of confusion, wondering at the powerful unravelling of a female generation, who is telling the story and what is actually happening. In terms of the magical realism that coheres with *carnalismo*, storytelling by these women is replete with confused boundaries, permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.

While family trees and lineage are highly relevant to the transmission of names, culture and personal histories as proved by the complex generational and ancestral consciousness that dominate in both *The House of the Spirits* (1982) and *Portrait in Sepia* (2000), storytelling also explores the boundaries of reality by foregrounding postmodernist literary devices. If *carnalismo* is to endure as a potent symbol for these women, it does so by testing narrative boundaries and creating several kinds of stories. These are stories that combine numerous narrative perspectives and modes of presenting several female storytellers with unannounced agendas. In this connection, Aurora del Valle, female storyteller in *Portrait in Sepia* (2000), as well as her grandmother, Paulina, feel the compulsion to leave a comfortable existence in the United States to discover their own family roots in Chile. Clara, Blanca and Alba in *The House of the Spirits* (1982) are interconnected through deep matriarchal ties which even death cannot disrupt.

2. OF MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS: *THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS* (1982)

Matrilineage and *Carnalismo*

According to Dulfano (1994: 5), ‘the search for a matrilineage is characteristic of many twentieth-century women writers who have begun digging into their past history through their mothers, revitalizing the silenced tradition.’ For these female storytellers, linked by instinct and magic, the subversive implications of a once male-led *carnalismo* are clear. Nivea’s daughters in *The House of the Spirits* (1982) are all eccentric, different and inheritors of ‘*the runaway imagination of all the women in her family on her mother’s side*’ (HS: 14). The ‘convoluted family dynamic’ (Cooper, 2008:16) of this novel posits a redefinition of *carnalismo* which requires the reintegration of female marginalization. Nivea the mother thus supports Rosa’s day-dreaming and subversively unusual needlework choices of ‘*impossible creatures*’ (HS: 16) while Severo the father worries and suggests the learning of normal domestic skills as far more desirable. But it is the mother who wins over the father.

The House of the Spirits (1982) subverts traditional patriarchy to define a key subject position for women in altering the direction of their societies. As united members of *carnalismo*, these unusual women transmit culture and power to each other and interpret family history from incomplete histories. They propose a new, more inclusive definition of family in an attempt to heal old wounds. Clara achieves this through her diary-writing and clairvoyance, a ‘magical’ trait inherited by the grand-daughter Alba:

My grandmother wrote in her notebooks that bore witness to life for fifty years ... Clara wrote them so they would help me now to reclaim the past and overcome terrors of my own (HS: 491).

Irreducible magic runs as a consistent storytelling process throughout the lives of these women. The restorative and creative power of clairvoyance, for example, permits the piecing together of matrilineal territories and forges an altered understanding of traditional *carnalismo*. It is largely in the domestic sphere therefore that the patriarchal interpretation of *carnalismo* is contested. In this

private sphere, where magical metaphors are so thorough and consistent, the community of these female storytellers reinterprets personal identities. This results in their own subjectivity and female ancestry taking on a much greater significance for them than their actual fathers or husbands.

Carnalismo and Storytelling

Storytelling, within this female *carnalismo* creates palimpsestic, co-existent stories. In the process of interpreting experience in a manner which honours its fullness and significance within *carnalismo*, Allende's female storytellers provoke newer understandings of that concept. Hence, Allende's novels emphasize that these women are in a position to effect changes because they have an instinctive awareness of themselves as women. For that matter, Clara responds instinctively to the private pains and insecurity of Esteban's spinster-sister Ferula, extending a '*pact of friendship that would last for many years*' (HS: 117) and welcoming her into her new home. Unspoken gestures of inheritance amongst grandmothers, mothers and granddaughters enact emotional bonding, female understanding and female stories:

Blanca hid the woollen sock with Clara's jewels in the most secret place she could find. She hoped that she would never have to sell them, and that one day they would shine for Alba (HS: 455).

The interpretations of female figures in Isabel Allende's novels are by no means stable. While the value of Latin American womanhood is reflected exclusively, or at least ultimately, through the roles of wife and mother, each female figure in *The House of the Spirits* (1982) is attributed an individuality and a distinct 'magical' personality. Nivea's '*astonishing fertility*' (HS: 13) is subversive enough in its multiplicity, Rosa's beauty is qualified as '*disturbing*' and '*not of this world*' (HS: 14) while Clara, who refuses to talk for nine years, possesses mental powers that are inherited by the granddaughter, Alba. Mothers and daughters establish an emancipatory matrilineal bond within *carnalismo*. Physically present within the home as wives and daughters, the women nevertheless do not appear to comply with the male figures. Rosa's early and mysterious death implies an eternal preserving of her virginity and keeping her

magical personality intact. For Esteban Trueba, Rosa's escape is a defiance to male possession:

The strongest feeling I remember having that night was frustrated desire, because I would never be able to satisfy my need to run my hands over Rosa's body, to penetrate her secrets, to release the green fountain of her hair and plunge into its deepest waters. (HS: 51)

Similarly, despite being married to Esteban Trueba, Clara never surrenders herself entirely:

He realized that Clara did not belong to him and ... she probably never would. He wanted far more than her body; he wanted control over that undefined and luminous material that lay within her and that escaped him even in those moments when she appeared to be dying of pleasure (HS: 118).

When Blanca is forcibly married off to the perverse Jean de Satigny, she eventually escapes and returns to the matrilineal fold to give birth to the daughter she conceives with Pedro Tercero Garcia. As an unwed mother, Blanca willingly remains outside the bounds of linear time and the male area of her father's home.

Because women are officially marginalized from power and therefore less encumbered, they have the capacity to break the cycle of repressive traditions within *carnalismo*. Indeed, these women are represented as having the psychological imperative to do so. They come closer to restoring identities and voices as the structure of patriarchy increases in dimension. The two sisters, Clara and Rosa, therefore retain their most intimate psychological recesses from masculine grasp. Clara's silence and Rosa's forgetfulness are reinscribed as subversive alternatives to submission to patriarchal laws. By articulating the nonconformist behaviour of such female figures, Allende subverts patriarchal social and literary scripts.

Within *carnalismo*, the women gain authority by translating their own silences into separate narratives of female desire and experience. As translator and

recorder, patriarchy legitimizes its own voice and desire. We can single out this type of multiplicity as a distinctly postmodern trait using the prism as a metaphor for postmodernism's predilection for spreading open and looking at the many facets of the postmodern individual. Not only do these female storytellers undergo fragmentation and splitting, but they are also conscious of it.

In this connection, *The House of the Spirits* (1982) is distinctly split into two narratives, one controlled by Esteban Trueba and the other controlled by patriarchy. Trueba's narrative is largely motivated by patriarchal attitudes of *conquista* and *reconquista* (Aquino, Machado and Rodriguez: 2002, xvi), a storytelling history of sexual and economic exploitation. The patriarchal connection, on the other hand, recreates the value of individual female experience while weaving it into generations of secret female history. In an attempt to represent what Julia Kristeva names 'women's time' (Kristeva, 1986: 187-213), Clara's notebooks create cyclical stories rather than linear ones:

She put her papers in order, and salvaged her notebooks that bore witness to life from the hidden corners of the house. She tied them up with coloured ribbons, arranging them according to events and not in chronological order (HS: 330-331).

By positing the two narratives side-by-side, Allende explores the tension between silence and voice, authentic female experience and that constructed for patriarchal ideology, folklore and sanctioned history.

***Carnalismo* as Narrative Process**

By recognizing the existence of primitive records, diaries and ancestral heritage, Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982) restores its female storytellers. When Alba, the youngest of this *carnalismo* clan, translates and records those histories, female voice is further empowered. This *petit récit* (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv) resists Esteban Trueba's own narrative and develops by recording personal as well as communal stories. These narratives record certain female experiences which are neither sufficiently nor authentically articulated by histories constructed from patriarchal perspectives. Therefore, as means to compensate for this lack, dreams and ghost-stories also form part of the *petit récit*, defying time and generation.

Esteban Trueba dreams of Rosa twice but even then, he is unable to reach or communicate with her.

Female *carnalismo* serves as a link between history and fiction and between reality and imagination. While Clara's diaries try to bridge the gap between past and present, Alba's ambition to rewrite family experience is an attempt to connect political and personal memory. Recalling Clara the *abuela* and Blanca the mother, Alba creates a cyclical remembering of her female ancestors and prevents time from becoming the linear experience that it otherwise is in the grandfather's narrative. A connection is thus ensured between herself and her female predecessors, defying space and time, and ensuring survival. Alba's experience of torture and near-death in prison summons ancestral support:

Her grandmother Clara, whom she had invoked so many times to help her die, appeared with the novel idea that the point was not to die, since death came anyway, but to survive, which would be a miracle ... Clara also brought the saving idea of writing in her mind, without paper or pencil, to keep her thoughts occupied and to escape the doghouse and live. She suggested that she write a testimony that might one day call attention to the terrible secret she was living through. (HS: 470)

As the youngest living member of the matrilineal bond in *The House of the Spirits* (1982), Alba emerges as an active female storyteller. Initially she is the migrant, vehicle and translator between the separate world of man and woman. She tries to integrate the two by giving voice to their tension and interplay. Her grandfather supports her writing of their personal story but then, she is also raped by Esteban Garcia. The problematic and violent fusion of the two stories leads to a future addition to this matrilineal set-up, confirmed by *abuela* – granddaughter clairvoyance:

I carry this child in my womb, the daughter of so many rapes or perhaps of Miguel, but above all, my own daughter (HS: 491).

Carnalismo is therefore reinvented by a raped and now pregnant Alba who incorporates her female imagination into the male framework of society and

brings a carefully hoarded network of stories of the past to be retold in the present and to be remembered in the future. In the name of survival, the women and other female 'ghosts' either invent or remember stories that reach far beyond their personal narratives and each creates an alternative to the male dominated world that surrounds her.

For matrilineal *carnalismo*, the ability to record and retell the past ignites powerful cultural and ancestral responses to patriarchal repression. Clara urges Alba to remember stories of the past in an effort to shape the present and the future. *Carnalismo* fuels culture and generation through the oral and written transmission of these women's narratives. It is a complex cultural and gendered space which brings together many times and realities and creates a spiral of stories, showing the close relationship between individual and collective memory. Matriarchy is a cultural vessel that navigates literature and history, the political and the personal, the present and the past through writing; therefore the *abuela*-granddaughter relationship is one that is essentially mediated through writing:

At times I feel as if I had lived all this before and that I have already written these very words, but I know it was not I: it was another woman who kept her notebooks so that one day I could use them. I write, she wrote, that memory is fragile. (HS: 490)

3. FRAGMENTATION AND MEMORY: *PORTRAIT IN SEPIA* (2000)

***Carnalismo* and Personal Memory**

Portrait in Sepia (2000) also uses the motif of *la familia* around which a female storyteller tries to recuperate a personal, but disseminated history. Maria Ines Lagos argues that this novel presents the view of an insider who looks upon her society from the margins (2002: 112). As compared to the intricate records of matrilineal memory in *The House of the Spirits* (1982), it is the very absence of memory that provokes Aurora del Valle, protagonist of *Portrait in Sepia* (2000), to pursue and discover her personal story as a daughter and as a woman.

In typical postmodern vein, Aurora's story is made up of discontinuity, gaps and erasure. Yet, the magical realist prevalence of dream-sequences in her story tends to blur the boundaries between reality and non-reality. This informs a recurring contention in her storytelling process. Thus, discontinuity, anonymity and partial truths are experienced as motivations to make oneself known, to narrate both storyteller and story into coherent existence. Aurora cannot stop telling her story, however disseminated her memories might be; if she does her quest will be over. Aided by dreams, she repeatedly interrupts her world of stories to introduce more stories.

If storytelling in *The House of the Spirits* (1982) is mediated through a straightforward *abuela*-mother-daughter set up, the storyteller Aurora del Valle is nevertheless portrayed as a *mestiza* (Anzaldúa, 1987) daughter without an apparent history. This story which self-consciously remains untold, is one aspect of postmodern narrative processes. The dispersed meaning of *la familia*, disseminated over Chinatown, the United States and Chile, further problematizes this *mestiza* storyteller's quest for personal memory and story. The type of narrative mode adopted creates distance and a sense of alienation from which Aurora del Valle tells her story.

Matias Rodriguez de Santa Cruz refuses to recognize his illegitimate daughter; while Severo del Valle, madly in love with Lynn Sommers, the *mestiza* half-Chinese mother, recuperates the daughter and acknowledges her legally. The two *abuelas*, Eliza Sommers and Paulina del Valle, construct various facets of Aurora's personal history, each wishing to keep her until circumstances favour Paulina and, by extension, a Chilean identity trajectory begins for the *mestiza* female figure. Aurora del Valle's personal story is complicated because there is apparently no possibility of self-definition from such a chaotic past. If the *abuela*'s role is to preserve in *The House of the Spirits* (1982), the role is reversed in *Portrait in Sepia* (2000):

The two grandmothers agreed right there that to avoid confusing their granddaughter even more, it would be best to make a definitive break with her mother's family and that she would not speak Chinese again or have any contact with her past ... with time little Lai Ming would forget her origins. (PS: 126)

For Aurora del Valle, the deliberate concealment of her *carnalismo* is the cause of her fragmented personal history. Consequently, her storytelling is replete with blank spaces. Several times in the course of the story, she admits, ‘*I don’t remember*’ and ‘*I don’t recognize*’ (PS: 93). This kind of disjunction maintains the notion of dissonance in that this storyteller’s thoughts are distanced from her body’s physical experiences.

Carnalismo and Mestizaje

As discussed by Guardiola-Sáenz (2002) and illustrated in the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), the concept of inner dialogue forms part of *mestizaje* memory and heritage and influences the nature of storytelling. Aurora’s mixed blood tallies badly with her authentic Spanish appearance and her Spanish *abuela*’s determination to ‘*erase any trace of [her] origins*’, (PS: 93) provoking her desire for personal story. What is emphasized is her de-localized experience of physical sensations and conscious thoughts. As a representation of cultural and personal identity, inner dialogue (Alarcón, 1983: 182-190) targets an inner identity that comes from the past and that gives Aurora the power to exist as other and to define her story in her own terms and space. This self-definition from the past breaks with the negative identity mediated through categories of difference.

Through this heritage of inner dialogue, Aurora can produce an identity from her own *mestiza* consciousness. Her inner dialogue takes the form of dream-sequences, partial remembrances, recurring nightmares and her own passion for photography. In an attempt to trace her personal *mestizaje* history within a fragmented *familia*, Aurora is given the agency to transform that history in a way which a fixed Chilean identity that has been imposed on her cannot:

With these photographs and these pages ... I can revive my mother, who died at my birth, my stalwart grandmothers, and my wise Chinese grandfather, my poor father, and other links in the long chain of my family, all of mixed and ardent blood. (PS: 303-304)

As a woman born in Chinatown and of mixed parentage and living her adolescent and adult years in Chile, Aurora offers a form of storytelling that is an example

of postmodern plurality. Throughout her quest for story, both the spaces that she inhabits as well as her hybrid identity help her to acquire personal memory. Truth is acquired through even slight attempts at a unified *familia*; thus the brief return of the biological father, Matias Rodriguez de Santa Cruz, and the final legal acceptance of his daughter represents the source of a new and crucial connection to Aurora's story:

Matias Rodriguez de Santa Cruz came to the house just when I was waking to adolescence, and he gave me what I most needed: memory ... he told me he was my father, and the revelation was so casual that it didn't even shock me. (PS: 187)

By acknowledging the complexity of her *familia* context and by listening to her disseminated memories, this *mestiza* female storyteller can understand better the perspectives and the sources of her identity and the ways in which she can use them as lenses towards personal story. *Portrait in Sepia* (2000) centralizes inner dialogue as a means to fuel the return to heritage.

While re-membering her scattered family through a process of dreams and memory, Aurora gradually recovers pieces of her cultural identity and integrates them into her present reality. Her disseminated personal identity gathers a semblance of coherence by persistent memories that are released 'drop by drop, like gentle rain' (PS: 187) and which reinstate the magic realist value of her storytelling. The gradual recovery of memory in this novel occurs as a site of struggle with the past and the present, rupture and hybridity and also represents a place of dialogue and conversation with the past. The dead Chinese grandfather, for example, provides solace and further memory for Aurora's story:

My grandfather is the clearest and most persistent memory in my life ... I hear him singing to me in Chinese. He circles around me, he walks with me, he guides me, just as he told my grandmother Eliza he would do after his death. (PS: 94)

Similarly, the recurring nightmare of 'children in black pajamas' (PS: 94) that pursues Aurora right from childhood to married life is another significant aspect that helps fill up her vacant memory. At the end of the novel, this nightmare is recognized as a crucial episode in Aurora's childhood when Tao C'hien the

grandfather is murdered in the heart of Chinatown with Aurora as eye witness.

So Aurora`s story is basically the conflict of memories, between the early inhabitants of those memories and those who have now dispossessed her of them, with a long history of family struggle, rupture and hybridity. Her storytelling is based on possibilities. The text creates mutually exclusive story lines, alternate textual realities and then allows for their simultaneous existence. The gradual piecing together of memories reflects an exploration of real and imagined boundaries. As the protagonist of her own story, the female storyteller in *Portrait in Sepia* (2000) must rummage through memory and re-appropriate her own text. This female storyteller, by underscoring her initial lonely childhood, failed marriage with Diego Dominguez and new-found love for Dr Radovic, reflects on the value of *la familia*. She resists the memory imposed on her and learns to confront her own dispersed history. Thus, the whole unified form of this storyteller breaks apart into multiple reflections.

The presence of the formidable matriarch, Paulina del Valle, provides a system of dominance over *mestiza* memory. However, Aurora`s curiosity and acceptance of her mestiza roots demands a reading from herself, with a clear awareness of the power relations that she needs to defy in order to define her own identity. The gradual forming of memory in this novel relates to Aurora`s awareness of her own fragmented identity as a dubious family member which can be strengthened by acknowledging both its multiplicity and its incompleteness. Hence, the insufficiency of memory is recognized by the storyteller. At the beginning of the novel, she admits that, *‘There are so many secrets in my family that I may never have time to unveil them all: truth is short-lived, watered down by torrents of rain’* (PS: 3). At the end of it, the same uncertainty prevails through *‘diffuse shadings’* and *‘veiled mysteries’* (PS: 304).

Carnalismo: Quest for Family Authenticity

Aurora`s pursuit of memory *‘through persistence and good contacts’* (PS: 93) is

a matter of creating new life, working to sustain and renewing ties within *la familia*, as well as personal grief over destroyed family data. The recognition of herself as little Lai Ming, the recollection of her grandfather`s murder and the

final acceptance of herself as separated from her husband and without a genuine family, challenge stereotypical paradigms of proper families, proper family pictures and proper lineage. In this sense, she cannot fit into the traditional patriarchal household of her husband's family, the Dominguezes. Aurora's *mestiza* consciousness functions as an asset for the piecing together of her personal story.

So her *mestizaje* inheritance of Western culture and 'other' spirituality provides an ethos which now values past relationships, inclusivity and reverence for story. The *mestiza* storyteller reconstructs her own story and a new consciousness is formed. By straddling a multiplicity of cultures, reconciling herself with her origins and finalizing her story, Aurora ensures her future with Frederick Williams, her English stepfather and Dr Radovic, Balkan refugee and lover.

The female storyteller in *Portrait in Sepia* (2000) remains autonomous and provides an emancipatory interpretation of otherwise traditional themes like *la familia*. The formidable matriarch Paulina del Valle possesses '*unequaled entrepreneurial instincts*' (PS: 7) and overpowers her husband financially. Aurora, rapidly disillusioned by marriage, escapes institutional discipline by going back to her '*magnificent grandmother*' (PS: 271). It is Eliza who takes the initiative of burying her husband in Hong Kong. Aurora's pursuit of memory also parallels the evolution of the female self.

The progressive impact of memory awakens an autonomous space, where this female storyteller can, openly and without restraints, explore, deliberate on, and test her own self-understandings. A crucial instance of this state of being occurs when the disillusioned and married Aurora captures her body, emotions and psychological turmoil through photography:

In the anguish of identifying what was lacking in me, I devoted hours and hours to shooting self-portraits, some before a large mirror I had brought to my studio, others standing before the camera. I took hundreds of photographs; in some I am dressed, in some I'm naked; I examined myself from every angle, and the only thing I discovered was a crepuscular sadness (PS: 255-256).

It is important to note that the photography motif permeates the quest for memory in this novel. Photo sessions, photos discovered by Aurora and photos deliberately sent to Aurora redesign her identity as granddaughter-daughter-wife. Photographs transmit a feeling of belonging and archiving within *la familia*, an artistic framework around which this female storyteller can organize her various stories.

Identifying an inner core of cognitive authority based on a self-understanding of herself as *mestiza* woman, Aurora therefore photographs her memories. The photographs develop and clarify the value of family relationships or, in some cases, denote failure and loss. The granddaughter's admiration and memory for the grandmother is at best highlighted through photography:

In the first photograph I took of her, when I was thirteen, Paulina is in her mythological bed, propped up on pillows of embroidered satin, wearing a lace nightgown, and decked out in a pound of jewels. That's how I saw her many times, and that's how I would have liked to see her at her wake. (PS: 6)

Photographs provide the foundation for memory and a relevant, compelling and in-depth presentation of *female carnalismo*. Aurora willingly confronts her past and her disseminated family in a headstrong enterprise of travel and communication, leading to further photographic discovery:

I have several photographs of my mother, Lynn Sommers, that I saved from oblivion ... I went to San Francisco several years ago to meet my uncle Lucky, and while there I spent hours scouring old bookstores and photography studios, looking for calendars and postcards she posed for. My uncle Lucky still sends me some when he comes across them. (PS: 93)

As female interpreter of *carnalismo*, Aurora alters the norms that have traditionally defined and even confined it. By rejecting the conservative version of the culturally correct *familia*, Aurora validates her sexuality and her presence and learns to articulate her own needs as a woman. From inner dialogue, she then moves on to outward dialogue. Initiated by photography and the psychological journey to recuperate memory, the open expression of her needs challenges the

logic of difference and invites a logic of otherness. Her disappointment and frustration after her sexual initiation by Diego Dominguez reflects this movement towards outward dialogue:

My clearest memory of that night was one of disenchantment ... I lay awake in the dark with a cloth between my legs and a searing pain in my vagina and my heart ... I felt I was the victim of a terrible biological injustice ... (PS: 229-230)

But her love for Dr Radovic, following her marital disappointment, allows her to pursue her instinct and to associate desire with personal pleasure. Her 'tremendous desire to touch that man' (PS: 278) records her initiative and her difference as a desiring woman. Aurora's cultural and personal formation of identity through memory and inner dialogue implies reconciliation with a disseminated *familia* while the emergence of outward dialogue implies a recognition of body and desire. In this novel, magical realism is used to create a realistic world but also to subvert it and transgress the patriarchal laws of *la familia*. Overall, this storyteller's constant confusion about her identity challenges the notion of the neatly bounded subject and repeatedly constructs and tears down the reader's sense of narrative grounding.

4. CONCLUSION

Allende asserts that 'I have to be a feminist. I am aware of my gender; I am aware of the fact that being born a woman is a handicap in most parts of the world' (Iftekharruddin, 1999: 359). Her exclusive choice of and focus on female storytellers redefine functional possibilities of Latin American narrative in different ways – the women's desire for story, female bodies as integrated within fragmented postmodern narratives, female sexual desires and matriarchy.

Underpinned by an understanding of *carnalismo*, the article pursues various facets of storytelling by different women.

Formerly violated and repressed, these Latin American female selves now celebrate their marginalized identities in terms of *carnalismo* and *la familia*. Operating from differing setups, these various female selves promote alternative

narrative modes, resulting in narratives that give an affirmative and celebrative outlook on the women concerned. Since Allende's world of female *carnalismo* is largely motivated by ancestry and memory, it opens up highly productive imaginative spaces for new kinds of freedom and *jouissance* for such kinds of female storytellers.

5. ABBREVIATIONS

The House of the Spirits – HS

Portrait in Sepia - PS

6. REFERENCES

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