



## Historical Verisimilitudes in Fictional Universe: Cultural Poetics in the Works of Allende

Vol. IV, No. IV (Fall 2019) | Page: 550 – 556 | DOI: 10.31703/grr.2019(IV-IV).49

p- ISSN: 2616-955X | e-ISSN: 2663-7030 | ISSN-L: 2616-955X

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### Abstract

*This study analyzed Isabel Allende's novel The House of the Spirits by probing the correlation between fiction and history. The theory of New Historicism was used to examine the 'textuality of history and the historicity of the text.' The study argues that Allende's novel can be read as a subversive text that problematizes the boundary between fiction and history. The novel was analyzed by creating a parallel between the fictional work i.e. The House of the Spirits and the history book i.e. The History of Chile to question the neutrality and objectivity of history. The appraisal incorporated the biographical, political, historical and cultural contexts to evaluate the characters, themes and events of the novel. The study analyzed Allende's novel in the backdrop of the text's historical, social and political circumstances. The findings of the study show that Allende's novel is a product of its time, locale, context and the novelist's biography.*

**Key Words:** Fictionalizing History, Historicizing Fiction, Historical Context, Literary Text, New Historicism.

### Introduction

Literary texts are never written in a vacuum, through fictional works authors try to communicate to the wider audience via language. According to Didier Coste, "An act of communication is narrative whenever and only when imparting a transitive view of the world is the effect of the message produced." (Didier, 1989) But in certain contexts narrative does not only communicate but encodes history. A literary text is never written in a void; it always incorporates a direct or indirect reference to its historical period. (Garica, 2016) Literary artists draw the raw material of their fictional works from their surroundings. The artists are social beings who reside in a particular historical and cultural context, practicing certain political and religious beliefs, and all these details about an author's life help shaping the worldview of the artist that is communicated in the literary work. Literary artists are sensitive towards their surroundings so they pay keen attention to the social, political, economic and moral issues prevalent in their society and incorporate these facts in their fictional works. At times critics can draw a clear parallel between the fictional work and the historical era in which the author resides. The historical and political facts presented in the fictional works are filtered through an artist's consciousness so it incorporates elements from the artist's personality. Some literary artists have political inclinations and they try to propagate their political views through their fictional works. Sometimes the authors propagate their political inclinations overtly and at times they do it covertly to avoid persecution, especially in the societies where freedom of expression is curbed. (Geertz, 1973)

One such politically troubled society is Latin America that has had the most troubled political history. In this part of the world political unrest and social instability have become part of life. (Lang, 2010) The famous Latin American author Mario Vargas Llosa prophesized that creativity proceeds social conflict, violence and desperation. This pessimistic worldview comes out of the author's tragic personal experience. Llosa's literary theory is strictly based on an individual's understanding of the world. (Kollmann, 2002) Llosa's immediate reality does not only affect his literary theory but also his fictional products, similarly, most Latin American authors

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incorporate historical vistas in their fictional works not only to inform the reader about the prevailing political atrocities in their homelands but also to avoid persecution.

Isabel Allende's novel *The House of the Spirits* is one such text that narrates the fictional story of the historical and political realities of the twentieth-century Chile. The story is feminocentric as it is told from the vantage point of the female protagonist Alba. The novel is set in an unnamed country in Latin America. *The House of the Spirits* fictionalizes the life of a Chilean family over several generations incorporating the magical realist and postmodernist techniques. The status quo in the Chilean society is presented through the fictional characters belonging to the Trueba and Garcia families. Truebas are the conservative landowners and the Garcias' are the poor hacienda workers. The political history of Chile during the 1970s is fictionalized in the text and the author presents the fictionalized version of Salvador Allende socialist governments' election in the 1970 and later on the overthrow of the socialist government by the dictatorial regime. Allende further fictionalizes Pinochet's 1973 coup. (Allende, 1985)

### Statement of the Problem

The major problem presented in this study deals with the historical and cultural influences as a source of inspiration behind the fictional works of Isabel Allende. The fall of the socialist regime and the successive dictatorial rule in Chile did not only force the author to spend the rest of her life in self-imposed exile but also played instrumental role in the production of her most influential novel *The House of the Spirits*. This study analyzes Allende's novel in the light of the sociopolitical and biographical contexts of the author with special reference to the New Historicist approach.

### Research Questions

1. How does Isabel Allende fictionalize history in the novel *The House of the Spirits*?
2. How has Allende's literary creation been influenced by the author's historical context?

### Delimitation of the Study

The study was delimited to the analysis of the first novel of Isabel Allende, namely *The House of the Spirits*. The text was analyzed in the light of the new historicist approach and parallel was drawn between the novel i.e. *The House of the Spirits* and the history book i.e. *The History of Chile* to analyze the similarities and differences in the narration of the actual historical and political events. Although the study analyzes the general social fabric of the Chilean society, however, the major focus of this research are the two historical events in Chilean history: the socialist regime's rule and overthrow and the successive dictatorial regime of Pinochet.

### Objectives of the Study

- To examine how historical and political events are fictionalized in Isabel Allende's novel *The House of the Spirits*.
- To highlight the use of magic realist technique as a subversive form of writing to highlight the traumatic historical facts.

### Literature Review

The fictional works are not just works of art but at times they play the role of political agents that give voice to the silenced segments of society. Especially female authors play a significant role in this domain. According to Maria Ornella Marotti "Through fictional and nonfictional forms of narration, writers give voice to those who have been silenced and create stories for those who were excluded from history. Furthermore, through deviations from male standards, women writers create historical narratives that challenge predominant interpretations of history. Women's historical texts, thus, raise questions about the relation between women and history and between history and literature." (Marotti, 1999) Hence female authors do not only highlight the problems of their time through their fictional works but also accentuate the issues specific to their gender. Isabel Allende is one such author who incorporates the history and politics of her homeland in her fictional works.

Allende fictionalized the history of her country in her first novel, according to Alice A. Nelson, “*The House of the Spirits* may have spread the word about Chile’s recent history to people who otherwise might have known little about it”. (Nelson, 2002) Allende weaves the narrative around the politics and history of her motherland. As a fiction writer Allende incorporates history in the fictional work because incorporation of history and politics is part of Latin American fiction for long. “Latin American fiction has long transcended its entertainment purpose and established itself as a transmitter, decoder and safeguard of the memory of history (Carpenter, 2010).”

## Theoretical Framework

New historicism rebuffs dichotomy of history and literature, the method tries to access the relevance of the cultural context and the literary work. This method emphasizes that the political, cultural and historical context of the author influences the literary writer and it is foregrounded in the fictional productions. New historicism dismantles the binary of the fiction and nonfiction to give space to the disenfranchised groups in mainstream history. The method focuses on the reconstruction of the historical context of the fictional creation. (Brannigan, 1998) This study utilizes qualitative research method to analyze the fictional text of Isabel Allende in the light of the theory of New Historicism. New Historicism is a method of literary criticism that is distinct as compared to the traditional Historicism. It analyzes the relationship between the literary text and history. Unlike the traditional Historicism that treats history as an objective truth hence as reality, New Historicism analyzes both fiction and history under a similar semiotic and parabolic structure. New Historicism gives ample space to its practitioners to cross the boundaries of disciplines e.g history, politics, art and literature. (Veese, 1989) New Historicists consider the text as a product of the historical context and social realities so this study analyzes the novel of Allende in the light of the history of her country.

As a school of literary criticism, New Historicism considers fictional works as a product of the historical, social and cultural context of the literary artist, especially of the time period in which the literary work is produced. In other words the literary work reflects an author’s life and time. Since this school of thought considers history as an integral part of the fictional text so the practitioners of this theory analyze the fictional texts in the light of the historical books. Not only the main plot but also the themes and characters of the literary texts are analyzed in comparison to the actual society in a given time period. The critical approach of New Historicism has an interdisciplinary approach in which literary productions are questioned and analyzed in the specific cultural and historical context. (Veese, 1989)

This study investigates Isabel Allende’s novel from the perspective of New Historicism. The analysis highlights the textuality of history and the historicity of the text.’’ The text of *The House of the spirits* is read and interpreted in the light of its co-text. Analysis of the novel makes it clear that Isabel Allende presents the sociopolitical history of her country in her fictional work. The literary work of Allende has been compared against the history book entitled *The History of Chile*. It further analyzes the author’s use of magic realism as a subversive technique of writing to comment on the prevailing political system of her country.

## Analysis

Isabel Allende is considered one of the most influential female authors from the Latin American literary boom and her first novel *The House of the Spirits* is one of her representative works. In the fictional text, Allende uses the Trueba family as a prototype family of the landowning elite and connects the family saga to the larger events of Chilean history. Allende starts the narrative with the character of Estaban Trueba who goes to rebuild his family hacienda “Las Tres Marias.” Through the character of Trueba and his workers, Allende depicts the historical conflict between the oligarchy and the working class in Chilean history. (Nelson, 19)

The action of the novel takes place in Chile from the beginning of the twentieth century to the time of the fall of socialist government and the military coup in 1973. The work ends during the initial stages of Augusto Pinochet’s government who remained in power until 1990. Although the text records the historical and political upheaval of Chile during the twentieth century however the narrator never directly names the country. The author alludes to her country through geographical description and historical incidents. (Zapata, 2002)

The novel tells the fictional story of the social and political upheavals of the Chilean society in the decade of 1970. Comparing the fictional text with the history book highlights the fact that Allende fictionalizes the

contemporary history of Latin America in her fictional works, however, the process of fictionalization is twofold, on the one hand, the author fictionalizes history but at the same time historicizes the fiction. The parallel can be seen in the history and its fictional representation in the works of Allende. Isabel Allende has fictionalized the critical historical moments in the history of her country in her fictional works.

The novel presents the fictionalized version of the political history of Chile from the eighteenth century coming down to the 1970s. Allende fictionalizes the political upset in the history of Chile when the conservative party lost elections and the socialist leader Salvador Allende won the presidency. The author incorporates the minute details of the social, cultural, political and economic changes that the Chileans had to face during this time period. Later the author narrates in detail the scenes of the overthrow of the socialist government and the scenes of the military coup.

This family saga comments on the social, political, cultural and economic aspects of Chilean life. This postcolonial nation has turbulent social and political history and authors have done justice in incorporating these aspects of the history in the text. However, the text does not only look at the society from the surface level but digs deep down the very fabric of the society. It comments on the stratified Chilean society by showing characters belonging to different social and economic backgrounds. The upper class of the Chilean society are direct descendants of Europeans, these people are the most powerful politically and economically and play the dominant role in the politics of the country. These people are called the 'Blancos', in the narrative, the Trueba and Del Valle families present this influential social group.

Ever since the independence of the country military has played a significant role in Chilean society and politics and Allende fictionalizes the same fact in her literary creation. But Allende does not forget to comment on the conservative politicians and leftist revolutionaries in her fictional works. She fictionalizes the political Right through the character of Estabén Trueba, who is not only a politician but also a landowner. Trueba's harsh and cruel treatment of his tenants magnifies the larger picture of the Chilean society in which the landowners were oppressive and authoritative but also inhuman in their treatment towards their workers. These were the facts that disillusioned the working class and pushed them closer to the Leftist socialist regime. Although the regime could not survive for long however it was a major setback to the Rightist conservative politics of Chile. Allende comments on the plight of the peasants in these words, "The peasants hid their daughters and clenched their fists helplessly because they could not confront him. Estabén Trueba was strong and he had impunity." (Allende, 1985)

Trueba belonged to the landed gentry of the country who controlled the basic sources of production in the country. He belonged to the Rightist political party who controlled the political front of the country for long. He was so severe in his comments that he did not even want his tenants to have the right to vote. Commenting on the debate of the tenants right to vote, in the novel *The House of the Spirits* he remarks, "They don't know how to clean their asses and they want the right to vote! How are they supposed to know about politics when they don't even know where they live (Allende, 1985). Through the characters of Trueba and his tenants the author throws light on the class relationship and the political scenario of Chile.

These were the facts that played a significant role in the gradual decline of the Rightist parties in Chile and the rise of the socialists to power. (Tomasek, 1966) contends "Between 1938 and 1958 many observers felt that the rightist parties in Chile were dying a slow death. During these decades the percentage of the congressional vote obtained by the rightist candidates dropped from 48percent to 29 percent." The same fact is fictionalized by Isabel Allende in her fictional work. Allende shows this huge shift in the voting trends in these words "Soon it was evident to everyone that only a miracle would alter the results, which were growing clearer throughout the day. . . . At midnight it was announced that the left had won." (Allende, 1985) Analysis of Allende's fictional work in the light of the history book makes it clear that the author has recorded the historical truths in her fictional works. However, the fundamental difference between a literary artist and a historian cannot be ignored. Being an artist writing in the magical realist tradition, Allende at times exaggerates the situations in her fictional works. Commenting on the literary artists' role Allende says

The first lie of fiction is that the author gives some order to the chaos of life: chronological order, or whatever order the author chooses. As a writer, you select some part of a whole. You decide that those things are important and the rest is not. And you write about those things from your perspective. Life is not that way.

Everything happens simultaneously, in a chaotic way, and you don't make choices. You are not the boss; life is the boss. So when you accept as a writer that fiction is lying, then you become free. You can do anything. Then you start walking in circles. The larger the circle, the more truth you can get. The wider the horizon—the more you walk, the more you linger over everything—the better chance you have of finding particles of truth. (isabelallende.com)

Allende herself confesses that she merges the facts with fiction confesses that fact and fictional are intermingled in her literary works. The unrest in the ordinary people in Chile help the leftists in gaining power in the early years of the decade of 1970 and Salvador Allende rose to power and became the first elected socialist president of Chile in 1970. The polarization of the Chilean political parties was the actual reason for the rise of the socialist regime. Although, Allende only got 3.6 percent of the total votes in 1970 to become the elected president but he was able to form government because the center and right political parties were unable to form a coalition so none of the party gained majority which helped the socialist party to gain control of the government. Salvador Allende remained the president of the country for three years and these years were very crucial in the history, commenting on the fact Tomasek remarks

“The Chilean road to socialism would lead to a new kind of state, economy, and society. Yet this transformation was to be within the framework of existing norms and institutions. Indeed, that was to be the essential characteristic of the Chilean socialist transformation. It sought to initiate a revolutionary process which would avoid the high social costs traditionally associated with major revolution.” (Tomasek, 1966)

The socialist president ruled the country from 1970 to 1973 but the experiment of a socialist form of government enjoyed triumph only during the first year and the last two years were really problematic not only for the government but also for the common public. Salvador Allende's government took several radical initiatives in nationalization the assets including the US-owned companies. The government in Washington was already not happy with Allende's election so this radical initiative was a radical step towards Allende's overthrow by the US-backed coup d'état. Other than this, Allende's government worked on land reforms and took charge of the huge haciendas owned by the powerful landed elite. Commenting on the socialist government's land reforms, the fictional character Estabén Trueba remarks:

that new Socialist candidate, a real nincompoop who has the nerve to ride up and down the country in his shabby little train, stirring the people up with his Bolshevik ideas, he'd better keep away from here if he knows what's good for him because we'll make mincemeat of him, we're ready and waiting, there's no owner for miles around who doesn't feel the same way I do, we're not letting anyone in here to start preaching against honest work, the reward for work well done, the reward for those who meet life head-on, you can't expect the weak to have the same as those of us who've worked from sunup to sundown and know how to invest our money, run risks, and take on responsibilities. (Allende, 1985)

The system of haciendas was functional in Chile from the colonial period and the economy of the country was dependent on this system. In other words, it meant that the economy of the country was in the hands of few landed elites. The system worked reasonably well for the agricultural economy of the country, however, it had its own disadvantages. The downside of the system included low production rate, concentration of the land in the hands of few (7.6 of the total population of Chile). Eighty percent of the agricultural farmland of the country was owned by these landed elites. This system could not employ the unemployed neither could it meet the needs of the increasing urbanized population of the country.

## Conclusion

Isabel Allende's first novel *The House of the Spirits* is a product of Chilean political and historical context. A parallel reading of the novel and the history book alongside the author's biography makes the historicity of the text quite evident. Allende blends the margins of history and fiction to juxtapose facts and fiction that makes the historical reading of her text more clear. The hermeneutical effects of the text engage the reader in the historicized text. It is evident that Allende's personal experiences help the author in creating fictional characters for her novels.

Conventional history books and journalism are not the only ways of preserving the history of a nation. Literature can also serve the purpose by fictionalizing the historical and political truth about a country. This study has analyzed Isabel Allende's fictional texts in the light of historical books to create a parallel between fact and

fiction. In order to draw the literary and historical parallel, the new historicist method has been employed. The study takes help from the new historicists' claim of the equal weightage of the historical and fictional details. The harsh political realities of the immediate present forced Allende to use the medium of fiction and the technique of magic realism to capture the history of her country. The study analyzes the reasons for the rise and fall of the governments in Chile during the decade of 1970. The author present in-depth analysis of the facts that played a major role in the decline of the socialist regime and the emergence of the military junta's government. A clear parallel can be drawn between Isabel Allende's fictional creation and the actual history of her country. She marvelously juxtaposes the facts and fiction to create a formidable portrait of the Chilean politics and history.

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