



Abstract: *Latina women have generally been peripherized in Western academia and feminism as oppressed and disenfranchised but Isabel Allende in her novel Daughter of Fortune (1999) contests these Western notions by creating resilient and assertive female protagonist. Allende reconstructs the history of California Gold Rush by redefining the role of women from South America. Through this act she takes the role of a historian, an ethnographer and a storyteller by narrating the long forgotten role of women during these critical times and replaces the Western version of history. The selected novel tells the fictional account of the presence of Chilean women in California during the 1840s. The paper utilizes Linda Martin Alcoff's feminist philosophy to analyze the fictional text.*

Key Words: Stereotype, Oppressed, Resilient, Female, History

Introduction

As a Chilean American, Isabel Allende Liona contributes conspicuously to the Latina American visibility. She was born to a Chilean diplomat, Thomas Allende, in Lima, Peru on August 2, 1942. At the time of her birth her father was posted in Peru. Isabel Allende got prominence in the regional and international literary scenario because she was niece of the first Socialist President of Chile i.e. Salvador Allende, who was elected in 1970 and was later removed through a military coup in 1973. After Allende's father abandoned his family, her mother Francisca Liona, brought Allende along her two brothers back to Chile. Isabel Allende's mother later married another Chilean diplomat Ramon Hiudabro and travelled to different countries along her children. Allende spent most of her childhood in Lebanon and Bolivia, where her stepfather was posted, however, she was sent back to Santiago, Chile in 1958 when the Civil War started in Beirut.

When Allende entered her professional life she first started working as a secretary in the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Santiago but later on she started working as a journalist for a women's magazine, Paula. Later on she worked for the children's magazine, Mapato, for several years. She also worked for few television documentaries and shows. Her professional career was smooth until September 11, 1973, when her uncle Salvador Allende's democratically elected

government was toppled. The president was assassinated and the reigns of the government were taken over by General Pinochet. This political upheaval in the country impacted the overall socio-political situation of Chile, but the impact on Isabel Allende's life was twofold. She was closely related to the assassinated president and was also an investigative journalist.

After Salvador Allende's overthrow she highlighted many political crimes of the Pinochet regime and also helped the political opponents of the reigning regime in fleeing the country. Her political activities against the interest of the ruling elite could not remain a secret for long and she was forced to leave her country to escape political persecution. After leaving Chile, she initially lived in Venezuela but after sometime she shifted to the United States of America. In the U.S she started writing novels but the themes and content of her works revolved around her homeland. Her initial two novel i.e. *The House of the Spirits* and *Of Love and Shadows* are autobiographical and narrate the family history and life story of the author. In both the novels Allende focuses in some part of Chilean history and creates the characters and situation that resemble the actual incidents in the history of the country. In her novel *Daughter of Fortune* she tells the story of a Latina woman who travels across the American continent disguised as a man during the California Gold Rush.

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Born in Chile and settled in the United States, Isabel Allende tries to bridge the gap between the American (continent's) North and South by breaking the stereotypical image of Latina women. Especially the mid-1800s setting of the novel "permits the author to synthesize the history of the two American continents" (Martin, 2010). In doing so, she serves as a cultural mediator between Latin America and North America and endeavors to deconstruct the cultural and regional stereotypes of Latina feminine. She creates strong fictional female characters to speak about the historically resilient Latina. This paper illustrates how Allende opposes the Western distorted symbol of Latina women as oppressed and relegated by appropriating the revolutionary women who crossed the American continent during late 1800s. The novel creates "a series of contact zones between the emerging nations of the United States and Chile" (Martin, 2010). This paper argues that Isabel Allende proposes a hybrid-in-between subjectivity of Latina women that challenges all hegemonic representations and restrictions by defying the socio-cultural norms.

The fictional character of Eliza Sommers crosses the American continent and travels from Chile to the United States of America in the late 1800s. She travels to the United States searching for her lover who had gone to the U.S in search of gold. During this time hundreds of thousands of people from across the American continent travelled to the U.S. In the history of the United States of America, it was a time "When gold was discovered in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains at a sawmill owned by the Swiss immigrant Johann A. Sutter. A mania for gold spread throughout the world, fanned by newspaper accounts of instant wealth acquired by early migrants" (Foner 2010). Eliza's lover travels to California in search of gold after listening to the stories of Chileans who had made fortune in the region and had returned successful. Being the only son of an impoverished mother he wanted to uplift his social position and the easy way for him was to earn quickly. Eliza's lover, Joaquín Andieta, symbolically represents many young Chileans of the time who left their native land and went to United States of America in search of wealth and power. Mainstream historical narratives of the time also acknowledge the presence of Latin American men in California during these challenging times but what these historical narratives do not mention is the women who travelled alongside men and settled in the United States. Eric Foner in his book *Give Me Liberty! An American History* notes "California's gold-rush population was incredibly diverse. Experienced miners flooded in from Mexico and South America" (2010). Isabel Allende

reconstructs the history by acknowledging the forgotten history in which women beside men migrated to the U.S in search of *El Dorado*.

Conceptual Framework

This study utilizes the conceptual postulates of the Latin American feminist philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff. Her work calls for inclusion of historically unrepresented group's inclusion in philosophy, including the feminist philosophy. She propagates decolonial approach to cope with the "colonial rhetorics about backward societies that need to be 'westernized'" (Alcoff, 2006). She brilliantly points out the shortcomings of Western feminism by saying:

The problem with imperial feminism, whether performed by state or nonstate actors, is simultaneously political, theoretical, and epistemological. It is wrong to assume the right of unilateral intervention into far-flown contexts, especially as this often disempowers local female agency and curtails livelihood. (Alcoff, 2006)

Alcoff labels Western feminism as imperial because she blames the Western knowledge industry of wrongdoings and assuming that West already knows people from the Global South. Accusing the Western feminism, she asserts "mainstream face of feminism took on such a white, middle-class presentation that this more complex reality was obscured" (Alcoff, 2006). She calls for decolonizing the feminist theory to "subsume differences between contexts within some meta-level rubric that takes itself as transcendent of context" (Alcoff, 2006). According to her this imperial Western feminism "assumes a fixed and stable universal meaning to the idea of feminism" (Alcoff, 2006) and does not indulge into a dialogue with the given context to realize the differences. Alcoff argues that the Latina feminist theory needs to "embrace intersectional approaches that explore the co-implication of gender, race, class, and sexuality" (2006) and focus on national differences and geographical locations.

Analysis

The story of *Daughter of Fortune* revolves around the female protagonist, the sixteen years old Eliza Sommers, an orphan who is raised by the Sommers who live in the British colony of Valparaiso, Chile. Although, Eliza is raised in a conservative environment but she still has the courage to take the arduous journey across the American continent. Sommers household consists of Miss Rose Sommers, a well-intentioned spinster and her two brothers Jeremy Sommers and Captain John Sommers. Jeremy was the director of British import and export company in Valparaiso and John

Sommers was a sailor. The Sommers were English by origin who migrated to Chile when the country opened its doors for immigrants after independence in 1810. Sommers were among those early English settlers who quickly made fortune as merchants and businessmen in Chile and brought their families and decided to settle in this far flung South American country.

The Sommers adopt Eliza as an orphaned girl but the author subtly refers to the possibility of she being the illegitimate daughter of Captain John and some anonymous native Indian woman. Eliza is raised under the observant eye of Rose Sommers, who is described as an unconventional woman who was not “daunted by the stigma attached to spinsterhood; just the opposite” (Allende, 2004). In creating the fictional character of Miss Rose Sommers, Allende creates a buoyant character of European ancestry who is exotic and hypersexual not unlike her stereotypical counterparts from Latin America. Rose's character is perceived much as a Latina would be conceived in a Western mind. Rose's character is juxtaposed with Latina feminine characters and the narrative “tends to privilege marginalized voices” (Carvalho, 2021).

Isabel Allende creates characters belonging to different races and social classes but attributes agency to the *Mestizo* Eliza. While the Western representations of Latinas symbolizes them as silenced and oppressed, Allende in her fictional text gives them agency and courage. While the mainstream history books portray the archetypical males travelling to the North, Isabel Allende creates a courageous female character that travels from the South America to the North. Eliza's journey towards the North America is “reinscription of the social imaginary,” or a constant rejection of the boundaries that have traditionally defined the limits of gender, race, class, and nation” (Martin, 2010). Through Eliza's story, Allende shows how this timid young girl from Chile transgresses “boundaries of gender, race, class, physical space, and the nature of reality itself” (Carvalho, 2021). Allende's narrative documents the unrecorded part of the history of California Gold Rush in which women also contributed through various roles as laundresses, cooks or prostitutes.

When the news of gold being found in California reached Chile it created a stir in the lower strata of society that considered this as an opportunity. Allende notes:

The news of the gold discovered in California reached Chile in August. First it was a wild rumor from the mouths of drunken sailors in the brothels of El Almendral, but a few days later the captain of the

schooner *Adelaida* announced that half of his crew had deserted in San Francisco. (Allende, 2004)

Allende describes how Eliza's lover Joaquín Andieta leaves for California in search of gold, while she is left behind. Like many young Chileans of the time Andieta also wanted to make fortune in California by finding the “long-lost El Dorado” (Allende, 2004) and return to Chile to spend a comfortable life. According to Allende, “For Joaquín, California represented his one way out of poverty, his only chance to take his mother out of the slums” (2004). California was a way out of his subjugated position in Chile because he is “condemned to subordinate status because of his poverty as well as his illegitimacy” (Carvalho, 2021). The poverty stricken family of Joaquín can only come out of this situation through quick money. Success in California can offer him both financial and personal freedom.

Once Eliza realizes that she is pregnant, she decides to follow her lover and go to California, because “she was terrified at the thought of ending up like Joaquín's mother, branded with a shameful stigma, shunned by her family and living in poverty and loneliness with an illegitimate child” (Allende, 2004). Eliza's “taboo pregnancy catalyzes her picaresque adventures” (Martin, 2010). Although, Joaquín is the initial “motivator for the woman's journey, his path is unimportant to the narration” (Carvalho, 2021) and the narrative later on only focuses on the female protagonist's quest. Eliza originally resolves to seek help from her nursemaid Mama Fresia but later on it's actually a Chinese Tao Chi'en who helps her get across the continent. Eliza breaks the stereotype role of a woman at the time when it was thought the “No one goes there but bad women” (Allende, 2004) by going to California as a female belonging to a respectable family. The journey is not easy for Eliza because it was a time when women were not allowed to travel alone so she takes this journey disguised as a Chilean boy. Thus travel by a female at a time when it was considered taboo seems to imply “female agency and self-determination” (Carvalho, 2021). Isabel Allende narrates Eliza's discussion with Tao Chi'en:

Can you hide me in a ship? I have to go to California,” she explained.

“Why? That's no place for women, only bandits.”

“I'm looking for something.”

“Gold?”

“Something more valuable than gold.”

The man stared, openmouthed, because he had never seen a woman capable of such extremes in real life, only in classic novels in which the heroines always died at the end. (Allende, 2004)

Allende depicts the problems and hurdles which Eliza has to face during her journey. She courageously faces all the problems as a strong female and the narrator explains "If a woman is prepared to travel the world buried in a nightmarish hole in order to find her man, it is because she has much *qi*" (Allende, 2004). Through the act of Eliza's border crossing, Isabel Allende, "juxtaposes female development with a panorama of cultural and historical revolutions" (Martin, 2010). Eliza's act of leaving Chile and travelling to California was an act of rebellion against the Chilean societal norms. Eliza as a woman traveler is "transgressor of the conventional account of woman's place in the world, and tentative deviser of her own destiny through movement on her own terms, as an alternative to the masterplots of imperial conquest and domestic stasis" (Carvalho, 2021). Being in a foreign land emancipates Eliza and she feels more free.

Travelling as a male gives powerful position to Eliza. Allende notes that "the man's clothing gave her an unfamiliar freedom" (2004). Eliza secretly leaves Chile because she could not have left the country otherwise, similarly she has to disguise in California because the "social circumstances again force secrecy; her male disguises lend her social agency, the freedom to move about unmolested" (Carvalho, 2021). The subversive, resilient Eliza challenges the exorcised Western image of Latina by first leaving her country and then by moving about unmolested. The strong Eliza defies the notion of backward, monolithic and unchanging Latina. From a timid and naïve niece of Miss Rose Sommers she changes into a strong woman travelling the dangerous American frontier. While passing through the wild American landscape she comes across many new characters who diversify her experiences. She notices women and can not help comparing them to females back home, though she herself had "committed an unpardonable offense against society" (Allende, 2004). Allende's reappropriation of Latina woman helps wave off the negative perceptions and gives empowered voice to them. Eliza is depicted as a

changed person and she realizes that she "can never again be the Lady Miss Rose" (Allende, 2004) intended her to be. She was a strong woman who was travelling the frontier unattended by a male.

Through Eliza's character Isabel Allende illustrates the problems of women immigrants. During 1800s it was not easy for women to travel alone, especially in the lawless lands of the American frontier. When Eliza decides to move from Chile to the United States of America, she has to face certain problems. She was immature and shy girl who was unaware of the laws, norms and cultural values of this land of diverse immigrants, but once she landed on the port of California she had to put in extra effort and struggle to adjust. She had to face numerous problems ranging from physical, social, residential, legal, and economic to linguistic, yet she copes with them. Allende herself has the experience of living as a migrant so she skillfully portrays the problems of immigrants in her novel *Daughter of Fortune*. Eliza, remains physically ill throughout her voyage but still survives. This powerful representation of the female protagonist deconstructs the exotic and oppressed representation of Latina women. Although Eliza never finds her lover but the reader of the text feels she is still not a failure because this physical journey of the protagonist results in self growth and a renewed vision of her self worth.

Conclusion

Contrary to Western academic and feminist notions of Latina women as the suppressed other confined by the patriarchal traditional society, Isabel Allende creates a female protagonist who is educated, modern and shows agency. Almost all the female characters of the novel disrupt the Western notions of perceiving Latina women as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized" (Mohanty, 1991). Allende's fiction problematizes this notion and promotes a dialogue between the Anglo American stereotypical perception and the Latina other.

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