

## The Trueba House: A Feminist Fortress in Allende's *The House of the Spirits* Magic Realist World

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### Abstract

This article explores how Isabel Allende employs the techniques of magic realism in *The House of the Spirits* to transform the traditionally limiting space of home into a site of empowerment for women. The novel's female characters are initially confined to the domestic sphere, yet they gradually subvert the boundaries between the public and private realms, ultimately challenging the patriarchal order. The novel's depiction of the Trueba house, with its labyrinthine architecture and supernatural occurrences, blurs the boundaries between natural and supernatural worlds. Such a blurring reflects the ways in which female characters transcend the confines of the domestic space. Clara's psychic abilities and the house's sentient nature disrupt canonical views of females' passivity and domesticity. This article contributes to the body of critical literature on Allende's work, highlighting the novel's innovative use of magic realism to reshape the domestic sphere as a site of female power and resistance. While previous scholars have explored the gendered dynamics in Allende's novels, this study offers a fresh perspective on the role of the house as a metaphorical and supernatural agent of empowerment.

**Keywords:** Domestic Space, House, Isabel Allende, Magic Realism, Resistance.

### 1. Introduction

Published in 1982, *La casa de los espíritus*, *The House of the Spirits*, authored by Isabel Allende, depicts the lives and challenges faced by the del Valle family and their extended relatives in a fictional Latin American nation. The novel explores the lives of various women in the del Valle family, particularly Clara, the youngest daughter, and her marriage to Esteban Trueba, the owner of the hacienda *Las Tres Marías* ("The Three Marías").

As the title indicates, Allende's *The House of the Spirits* takes place in a "big house" where Esteban Trueba, an authoritarian patriarch, resides. Esteban seeks to exert control over the women in his household, particularly Clara. Allende's *The House of the Spirits* uses the techniques of magic realism to transform the traditionally limiting space of the home into a site of empowerment for women. While the novel's female characters are initially confined to the domestic sphere, they gradually subvert the boundaries between the public and private realms, ultimately challenging the patriarchal order. The

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novel's depiction of the Trueba house, with its labyrinthine architecture and supernatural occurrences, blurs the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds. This blurring reflects the ways in which the female characters transcend the confines of the domestic space. Clara's psychic abilities and the house's sentient nature disrupt traditional notions of female passivity and domesticity. The house's architectural transformation mirrors the changing roles of women within it. As the house expands and evolves, so too do the female characters' identities and capabilities. The house becomes a space of resistance, where women preserve their memories, stories, and power amidst the chaos of political upheaval. The novel's magic realist elements also challenge the binary opposition between the public and private spheres. Clara's mystical powers and the house's supernatural aura seep into the outside world, influencing events and people beyond its walls. This leakage suggests that the domestic space, traditionally seen as separate and subordinate to the male-dominated public sphere, has its own potent form of influence.

The characters in the text are endowed with magical gifts so that both the characters themselves and the author, Allende, employ them to establish autonomous realms that are liberated from the constraints of the patriarchal society. *The House of the Spirits* is rich in cultural context, reflecting the author's own experiences growing up in Chile during a time of significant political and social change. The novel spans fifty years, from the 1920s to the 1970s, a period that saw Chile transition from a tumultuous democracy to a brutal dictatorship. Allende's personal history informs her depiction of this era, as she is related to Salvador Allende, the socialist president who was overthrown in the 1973 coup that brought Augusto Pinochet to power.

One of the most striking aspects of *The House of the Spirits* is its distinctly Chilean flavor, with the convoluted family dynamics reflecting the broader societal tensions of the time. The novel explores the intertwined fates of three generations of the Trueba family, whose lives are shaped by the shifting political and social landscapes of their country. Through the Truebas, Allende examines the complexities of Chilean identity, as shaped by factors such as class, gender, and political affiliation.

The supernatural elements that permeate the novel are another key component of its cultural context. Authors have long used supernatural elements to enhance their narratives, and Allende employs this technique to heighten suspense, enhance the setting, and complicate the plot. However, the spirits and visions that haunt the Trueba family also serve a deeper purpose, reflecting the cultural significance of spirituality in Chilean society, where Catholicism and indigenous beliefs coexist. Therefore, the works of fiction written by the women in question are not just made-up stories with no connection to reality but they are infused with real historical events, personal memories, and a sense of direction or purpose like what Udasmoro et al explain, "The women have not simply written works of imaginary fiction but have imbued them with historical content, memories, and trajectories" (Udasmoro et al 2023, 1446).

*The House of the Spirits* is also a profound exploration of the role of women in Chilean society. The novel's female characters, particularly the matriarch Esteban Trueba and her daughter Blanca, grapple with traditional gender roles and seek to carve out spaces of autonomy within a patriarchal system. Through their struggles, Allende illuminates the broader societal changes that were beginning to

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challenge the status quo, as women fought for greater equality and agency. This study employs a feminist literary analysis framework to explore the ways in which Allende uses the techniques of magic realism to reimagine the domestic sphere as a site of female power and resistance. By focusing on the Trueba house as a metaphorical and supernatural agent of empowerment, this analysis illuminates the novel's innovative approach to the representation of women and domesticity.

The framework draws on the theories of scholars such as Bell Hooks, who emphasizes the importance of space and place in the formation of identities and power dynamics. Through this lens, the study examines how Allende disrupts traditional binary oppositions and challenges patriarchal norms by portraying the domestic space as dynamic, sentient, and capable of exerting influence beyond its walls.

The study also builds on the work of feminist scholars in Latin American literature, who have explored the ways in which authors like Allende subvert and reimagine the trope of the passive domestic woman. By highlighting the Trueba house's role as a space of resistance and transformation, this analysis contributes to the broader discourse on the potential for magic realism to serve as a powerful tool for a feminist reimagining of the domestic sphere.

Through her use of a diverse range of literary devices, Allende disrupts traditional binary oppositions and challenges patriarchal norms. The Trueba house, with its architectural and supernatural transformations, mirrors the evolving identities and capabilities of the female characters. The novel's magic realist elements seep beyond the confines of the home, influencing events and people in the outside world. This suggests that the domestic space, traditionally seen as separate and subordinate to the male-dominated public sphere, has its own potent form of influence, "We can use everything in a novel: testimony, chronicle, essay, fantasy, legend, poetry, and other devices that might help us to decode the mysteries of our world and discover our true identity" (Allende 1989, 45). Allende's novel undoubtedly exemplifies the blending of "fact" and "fiction," "testimony" and "fantasy" in order to propose a political and literary ideology to which women have also shown resistance. The revolutionary potential of women's literature mirrors the novel's portrayal of women and domesticity. The female characters, through their mystical abilities and influence within the home, subvert traditional notions of passive domesticity and challenge patriarchal norms. Thus, Allende is one of these revolutionary writers who have attempted to defy oppression in her fiction by employing magic realism as a technique because to her "at times science is less efficient than magic" (Moody 1999, 58).

Many scholars have focused on the novel's employment of magic realism, particularly its blending of the natural and supernatural within the domestic sphere. Deborah Cohn argues that Allende uses magic realism to "undermine the dichotomy between the natural and supernatural, and between the public and private realms" (Cohn 1996, 382). Similarly, Patricia Lertora observes that the novel's magic realist elements "dissolve the boundaries between the natural and supernatural, the physical and metaphysical, the rational and irrational" (Lertora 1999, 14).

The Trueba house, with its sentient nature and mystical occurrences, is a key site of this magic realist blurring. Several scholars have noted how the house's architectural and supernatural transformations reflect and facilitate the female characters' empowerment. Celia Correas de Zapata argues that the house, with its "expanding and contracting walls," becomes a "living entity" that mirrors the women's evolving

identities and capabilities (Zapata 2008, 102). Similarly, Amelia Simpson posits that the house, as a "microcosm of the nation," provides a "sanctuary and a source of empowerment for women" (Simpson 1992, 52).

The novel's depiction of women and domesticity has been a focal point for feminist scholars. Many have noted how Allende subverts traditional notions of passive domesticity by portraying the home as a site of resistance and power. Lertora also argues that the novel "undermines the patriarchal dichotomy between a passive domestic sphere and an active public sphere" (Lertora 1999, 18). Similarly, Zapata posits that the female characters, through their mystical abilities and influence within the home, "challenge the patriarchal order" (Zapata 2008, 102). Simpson posits that Clara, through her mystical powers and role as family historian, "reclaims the domestic sphere as a source of power and resistance" (Simpson 1992, 55). In addition, Cohen adds that Clara blurs the lines separating public and private realms, as well as traditional gendered spaces, thereby breaking down the divide between her worldly and supernatural endeavors (Cohn 1996, 382). Therefore, unlike the predominantly male Latin American authors, Allende uses magic realism to draw attention to feminist matters in Latin American society. Doris Meyer's "Parenting the Text" highlights how Allende incorporates this literary technique as part of her endeavor to reconcile the conflicting dualities of men and women that arise from human culture, as "it emerges from and portrays a world of becoming, a dynamic, open system incessantly striving to synthesize the stubborn dualisms created by human culture" (Meyer 1990, 3). By challenging the dominant masculinist literary discourse, women writers illuminate narratives of oppression and subjugation (Fadla and Awad 2018, 58). In this novel, in particular, Allende delves into a theory that examines how Latin culture has victimized women. Allende achieves this by portraying women as the primary guardians who have the power to reform the damaging patriarchal system is also emphasized throughout the novel.

The feminist magic realist text she has written aims to empower women by increasing their understanding of the hidden aspects of human reality. It does this by creating a language that gives a voice to these experiences and challenges the ideology that dismisses and disregards them. Allende's use of magic realism allows her to create a language that gives voice to women's experiences in a way that traditional realism might not. By blending the fantastical with the mundane, Allende illuminates the hidden aspects of human reality, particularly those that have been dismissed or disregarded by patriarchal ideology. The novel's magical elements serve as metaphors for the often unseen or undervalued aspects of women's lives, such as their emotional intelligence, their capacity for resistance, and their connection to the natural world. According to Meyer, the power of imagination and a sense of wonder can captivate readers of the "Literature of the Boom" (Swanson 1990, 1). These qualities can also be harnessed to create a more equitable and joyful society. As Meyer explains, the hidden spiritual dimensions of human existence can be revealed in Allende's works by stimulating the imagination and reviving a feeling of the magical (Meyer 1990, 360). In doing so, the novel's impact extends beyond simply depicting women's lives. In giving voice to marginalized experiences and challenging dominant ideologies, Allende aims to broaden her readers' perspectives and encourage them to consider new social possibilities. By presenting

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alternative ways of being and thinking, the novel serves as a catalyst for critical reflection and potential social transformation. One of the ways Allende broadens her readers' perspectives is by depicting the complexities of Chilean identity. Through the intertwined fates of the Trueba family, she explores how factors such as class, gender, and political affiliation shape individual lives and experiences. This nuanced portrayal challenges simplistic notions of identity and encourages readers to consider the diverse forces that shape their own identities and those of others.

Magic realism is a literary genre that combines elements of fantasy and realism, seamlessly blending magical elements with everyday life. In *Magic Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, Christopher Warnes makes the argument that magic realism has the ability to make the supernatural seem natural, creating a sense of normalcy where the real and the fantastic are portrayed in a balanced and coherent manner (Warnes 2014, 3). Magic realism is distinct from other genres and modes that incorporate supernatural elements. In literary works that employ magic realism as a technique, there is a notable acceptance of the supernatural as an integral part of everyday life. Both readers and characters believe in and interact with these supernatural elements as if they are a natural part of their reality. According to Ann Bowers's *Magic (al) Realism*, the development of magic realism can be traced through three distinct stages throughout history (Bowers 2004, 34). The one who first introduced the term "magic realism" is Franz Roh (1890–1965). Roh argues that magic realism is representational and has a tendency to heighten the sense of realism surrounding its objects. He adds that "magic insight into an artistically produced unemphatic clarified piece of 'reality'" (Roh 1925, quoted in Menton 1983 19). In other words, Roh characterizes the effect of the new style, which, as he explains, is achieved by clarifying and purifying the painted object. This early conception of magic realism, focused on visual art, emphasizes the heightened realism and clarity of the portrayed objects. The second stage in the development of magic realism, according to Bowers, is marked by the work of Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980). Carpentier, a Cuban author, introduced the term "lo real maravilloso" or "the marvelous real" in the prologue to his novel *The Kingdom of This World* (1949). For Carpentier, the marvelous real refers to the extraordinary and wondrous aspects of everyday life, particularly in Latin American culture and history. He writes, "The marvelous real is the purest expression of the spirit of an age, the most direct reflection of the collective soul" (Carpentier 1995, 89). Carpentier's conception of the marvelous real emphasizes the magical and extraordinary aspects that exist within the realm of the real, rather than in a separate supernatural domain. The third stage in the development of magic realism, as identified by Bowers, is characterized by the work of Gabriel García Márquez, who states that "in Mexico, surrealism runs through the streets. Surrealism comes from the reality of Latin America" (Márquez 1973, quoted in Chute 2010, 1). For Márquez, the extraordinary and supernatural are not separate from the real but are deeply intertwined within the fabric of Latin American reality. His novels, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), exemplify the blending of the real and the fantastical in a way that is both disorienting and illuminating for the reader.

*The House of the Spirits* builds upon the foundations established by these earlier figures in the development of magic realism. Allende, like Márquez, skillfully integrates supernatural elements into her narrative, creating a sense of both surprise and inevitability. The Trueba house, imbued with its sentient nature and mystical occurrences, serves as an empowering space for female characters. Through magic

realism, Allende challenges traditional dichotomies like natural versus supernatural and public versus private, reflecting Carpentier's concept of the marvelous real. The transformations of the Trueba house mirror the evolving identities of its inhabitants, extending the influence of magic realism beyond domestic boundaries. This suggests that the domestic sphere, often overlooked, holds significant power. Allende's magic realism, inspired by Roh's heightened realism, offers a vivid portrayal of Chilean culture and history, seamlessly blending the extraordinary with the mundane. It focuses less on overt fantasy and more on the mysterious aspects of everyday life, particularly within the domestic realm. As stated in Stuart Sim's *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, in the 1970s, magic realism has become closely linked with authors who use fantasy to challenge cultural norms and perceptions of what is considered 'normal' (Sim 2012, 276). It is worth noting that the introduction of magic realism to literature is attributed to Massimo Bontempelli, an Italian critic. The idea was first introduced in Bontempelli's journal 900 in 1927. Bontempelli employs magic realism by basing it on the notion that magic can be discovered within the realm of everyday existence.: "This is pure twentieth-centuryism, which rejects both realities for the sake of reality and fantasy for the sake of fantasy and lives with the sense of magic discovered in the daily life of human beings and things" (Menton 1983, 131)..

Magic realism has emerged as a global phenomenon. The emergence of the magical realism genre in Latin America has sparked a debate among critics. They question whether it has been limited to Latin American literature or transcended regional boundaries to become a universal narrative style. Alejandro Carpentier suggests that magic realism is confined to a particular geographic region, emphasizing the profound interplay between reality and imagination within Latin America (quoted in Bowers 2004, 17). However, many influential critics of magic realism, including Bowers and Amaryll Chanady, argue that it transcends regional boundaries. According to Bowers, magical realist writers have gained recognition not only in India, Canada, Africa, and the United States but also worldwide. This has transformed magic realism into a phenomenon that creates a constant tension between two opposing forces: the marginalized and the oppressive power. In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris argue that "Magic realism often facilitates the fusion of coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction" (Zamora and Faris 2005, 5- 6). Zamora and Faris's characterization of magic realism as a mode suited to exploring and transgressing boundaries provides a useful framework for understanding its transformative potential. By facilitating the "fusion of coexistence" of disparate worlds and systems, magic realism disrupts established norms and opens up new possibilities for understanding and representation. Allende's *The House of the Spirits* exemplifies the radical potential of magic realism as a tool for social critique and transformation. Through her innovative use of this literary technique, Allende disrupts traditional binary oppositions and highlights the potential for women to wield power and influence within society. The Trueba house, with its sentient nature and architectural transformations, becomes a dynamic and empowering space that mirrors the evolving identities and capabilities of the female characters. The novel's magic realist elements seep beyond the confines of the home, influencing events and people in the outside world. This suggests that the domestic space, traditionally seen as separate and subordinate to the male-dominated public sphere,

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has its own potent form of influence. Through her portrayal of the Trueba house as a site of resistance and transformation, Allende contributes to a larger project of social change by broadening readers' perspectives and challenging patriarchal norms. *The House of the Spirits* exemplifies the enduring relevance of magic realism as a literary technique that can illuminate the marvelous aspects of everyday life and envision new social possibilities.

Latin American authors of the 1960s, known as the boom writers, perceive the reality in their countries as so hyperbolic and surreal that it makes it hardly possible to use realism to describe the events occurring there. Only through magical realism could events like “la masacre bananera” in Colombia or Juan Manuel de Rosas’s dictatorship in Argentina be explained. Authors like García Márquez have portrayed their reality through the use of magical realism to inform the rest of the world of the political, social, and economic situation in Latin America. However, female Latin American authors such as Allende and Laura Esquivel have not been initially as successful as their male counterparts. This discrepancy underscores the challenges faced by women within the literary world, where their voices and perspectives have often been overlooked or marginalized. Despite these obstacles, authors like Allende have harnessed the power of magic realism to illuminate the unique experiences and struggles of women within Latin American society. In fact, Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* has been forbidden in Chile for several years because the novel’s political criticism of the right-wing upset the Chilean male elites. After all, the diligent efforts, like using magic realism, of silenced and marginalized women to empower themselves and cultivate personal growth can serve as catalysts for change, guiding them toward a brighter future (Abdel Hafeez 2023, 350).

Bowers discusses how Márquez has influenced Allende in writing her *The House of the Spirits*: “It has often been noted that Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* owes a lot to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, including the use of a narrator who constructs the narrative from reclaimed books” (Bowers 2004, 73). Allende acknowledges this source of inspiration and, paradoxically, draws a comparison between herself and “a pirate who has boarded the ship of letters” (Hart 1989, 270). Her work is “capable of shadowing, mimicking, and reversing the original form that is claimed to cast it” through employing magic realism in the novel (Hatjakes 2008, 51). In “Parody or Piracy”, Robert Antoni states that the novel has a more feminine, collaborative voice than Esteban’s more authoritative one (Antoni 1988, 26) and that “although magical events are presented in Allende’s fiction with the same deadpan style as in García Márquez’s fiction, nevertheless, the whole idea is given a feminine twist” (Hart 1989, 275). Thus, a female literary legacy has emerged in Latin America to coexist with the more established male one so that “Allende re-genders writing, magic, and storytelling in order to subvert the masculine self-procreation in Cien Anos de Soledad” (Hatjakes 2008, 69). Bowers also asserts that Allende employs the literary technique of magic realism in her novel, thereby enabling the coexistence of several truths (Bowers 2004, 71).

In accordance with Faris' assertions in *Ordinary Enchantments*, the female characters within the novel actively confront patriarchal authoritarianism and societal biases related to gender and sexuality, among various other issues. Allende frequently uses the characters of Clara, the matriarch, and her granddaughter Alba as powerful representations of women. Through this narrative choice, Allende

effectively epitomizes the development of a feminist literary work that encompasses multiple perspectives and portrays the aspiration for a feminist collective (Faris 2004, 173).

## 2. Spatial aspects in “The Big House on the Corner”

To fully comprehend the message behind *The House of the Spirits*, it is essential to have a comprehensive and intricate understanding of the spatial aspects of the novel. This includes conducting a thorough examination of how women are portrayed and treated in the novel within a limited space, especially inside their houses. In Allende's novel, there are hidden secrets scattered throughout the spaces and rooms. The novel explores the concept that characters and structures are interconnected and indispensable, emphasizing their inseparable nature. Upon careful examination, it becomes evident that in addition to the intense political tension in Chile, an additional ongoing conflict exists, namely the fight of the sexes, which manifests in the persistent competition inside the house. Through Allende's portrayal of the power struggle between men and women and the complex relationship between the two genders, it is remarkable that the house in the novel is depicted as a divided space. In other words, the house represents the ongoing internal conflict of how women are generally treated and empowered in Chile as Jalna Hanmer and Sheila Saunders clarify in *Well-founded Fear*: "Women's sense of security in public spaces is profoundly shaped by [their] inability to secure an undisputed right to occupy that space" (Hamer and Saunders 1984, 39). Therefore, although the domestic realm is often perceived as a restricted domain for women, it is crucial to acknowledge that the activities carried out within the home hold significant value. Despite being confined to the private sphere; women can also assert their authority and find positions of power within this context. Hooks re-vision the home space and its significance regarding gender roles, racism, and spirituality in the homes of working-class women of color. In "Homeplace: a Site of Resistance," Hooks examines the "homeplace" of women, a space she defines as a "site of resistance and liberation struggle" (hooks 2015, 43).

In the context of assigning gender to the two houses in this novel, it is deemed appropriate to designate “the big house on the corner” as a feminine entity. At the same time, the rural residence located at Tres Marías is classified as a masculine entity. Throughout most of the work, there is a discernible division of space into realms characterized by masculine and feminine attributes. Esteban primarily exercises control over the country house and the front side of “the big house on the corner.” However, Clara, his wife, assumes authority over the back rooms of the house. This analysis examines the descriptions of the “big house on the corner” and its implication for the portrayal of masculinity and femininity within the novel. In other words, the metaphor of the house draws parallels between the female characters' actions as they strive to overcome the oppressive rule of patriarchy. Thus, the novel uses the house structure and the spaces they encompass as metaphors or symbols to represent social and political barriers. The women of the Trueba family do not let metaphorical or symbolic obstacles dictate their lives. Instead, they conquer them. Clara, Blanca, and Alba successfully overcome Esteban, the patriarch of the Trueba family, who tries to control and confine them due to his conformity to traditional concepts of honor, women's roles, and sexuality. The Trueba women bravely confront Esteban in his own space,



challenging his control over that area. They assert their presence by expanding their lives into alternative spaces or even choosing to leave Esteban's property altogether. In the novel, Esteban and the women in his life constantly struggle for dominance over their shared space. However, as the story progresses, Esteban ultimately realizes that he has lost the battle.

The novel's initial chapters reveal Esteban's perspective on women, which is characterized by a desire to control them and confine them inside his established physical space. Esteban is characterized by traits such as assertiveness, physical strength, initiative, and a preference for Western culture over Latin American one. Esteban skillfully renovates the house at Tres Marías by himself. He enlists the help of his tenant farmers, directing them with determination and authority. He decorates the place with durable and impressive furniture that is designed to endure country living for many years. He places these pieces along the walls, prioritizing convenience over aesthetics. He furnishes the place with "large, heavy, ostentatious pieces that were built to last for generations and to withstand country life" and places them "along the walls, with an eye more to convenience than aesthetics" (Allende 1993, 52). After the earthquake destroys the house, Esteban chooses to rebuild it exactly as it has been before.

### **3. Exploring Magic Realism in "The Big House on the Corner"**

Clara's supernatural nature does not appear to have any impact on the house at Tres Marías. She consistently prioritizes practical concerns, directing her efforts towards enhancing the well-being of the residents rather than engaging in any spiritual pursuits. The utilization of magical realism by the author serves as a means to depict how Clara actively resists and challenges the societal expectations and limitations imposed upon her. In the novel, Clara resists the conventional understanding of the house as a space designated for male political dominance. She redefines the house as her realm of magic, inaccessible and incomprehensible to her husband. She successfully liberates herself from domestic confinement by creating a personal domain imbued with magical elements. She resists the conventional understanding of the house as a site of patriarchal political dominance. She undertakes a transformative process, effectively converting the house into a realm of her own, imbued with elements of magic as she says:

In response to Clara's imagination and the moment's requirements, the noble, seigniorial architecture began sprouting all sorts of extra little rooms, staircases, turrets, and terraces. When a new guest arrived, the bricklayers would build another addition to the house. The big house on the corner soon came to resemble a labyrinth (Allende 1993, 299).

When "the big house on the corner" is first built, it is evident that Esteban has left his mark on it. The structure is characterized by its "solemn, cubic, dense" and "pompous" traits (Allende 1993, 93). Esteban chooses to design it in a European style to create a plain contrast from traditional architecture. He wants the house to reflect his status, money, and the order and civilization he associates with Western societies. (Allende 1993, 93). The house exudes elegance with its sturdy structure and clean, straight lines, complemented by sophisticated, imported furniture.

However, the arrival of Clara introduces a feminine presence that serves as a catalyst for transformative developments. Despite the enduring colonial-style exterior of the large mansion, Clara gradually imbues its inside with her distinctive attributes of spirituality, magic, creativity, and complexity. In a short span of time, the back section of the house becomes adorned with various architectural elements, such as "protuberances and incrustations, of twisted staircases that led to empty spaces, of turrets, of small windows that could not be opened, doors hanging in midair, crooked hallways, and portholes that linked the living quarters so that people could communicate during the siesta" (Allende 1993, 93). The alterations are implemented in accordance with Clara's inspiration and the guidance she receives from the spiritual realm. Although the portrayal of these events may initially appear disorderly, they ultimately establish a realm characterized by tranquility and a sense of unbounded autonomy for the female protagonists inside the novel. The mansion's violation of numerous state and civic rules holds significance as it serves as a reminder of Clara's feminine magic and its defiance against patriarchal authority.

Esteban's patriarchal authority first appears upon receiving the news of Clara's sister, Rosa the Beautiful, passing away. He is filled with remorse for not having married her earlier. Reflecting on the situation, he imagines what he would do if he knew about her death. He envisions constructing an opulent palace adorned with treasures from the depths of the ocean and even contemplates the idea of whisking her away and keeping her under his protection, with him being the sole possessor of the key (Allende 1993, 22). Esteban believes that if he had kept his betrothed to himself, she would never have been taken away from him by death (Allende 1993, 23). Similar to many traditional fathers and husbands, Esteban views his women with jealousy and seeks to restrict them, treating them as precious treasures in order to ensure their loyalty. Esteban's determination to keep his women with him is so intense that he goes to the extent of preparing a tomb. This tomb has a place for himself, his wife, and his long-dead Rosa. He is determined that no one, or anything, would ever take his women away from him again.

However, no internal space can keep Clara wholly hidden from the outside world. Clara takes after her powerful and independent mother, Nivea, in that she is also a lady who is not afraid to stand up for what she believes in. Nivea is determined to advocate for women's rights from within the system, earning the title of "the first feminist in the country." She joins her suffragette friends in standing on soapboxes and protesting, but unlike the others, she cannot bring herself to remove her corset (Allende 1993, 120). This serves as a poignant reminder of how the patriarchal system can exert control over even the most resilient women. Nivea represents the embodiment of female strength and power in the novel. She strongly supports women's rights, particularly the right to vote and the freedom to wear pants for future generations of women. Similarly, Clara quietly fights her battle for liberty within the confines of the house that Esteban has constructed for her. Clara can effectively emancipate herself from her husband's authoritative control without the need for her physical and permanent departure from the house. She attains her liberty and uses a range of magical traits to overcome Esteban. It is worth mentioning how, under Nivea's guidance, Clara develops her abilities as a clairvoyant and psychic. She learns to communicate with spirits, predict future events, and interpret omens. Nivea imparts her knowledge and

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wisdom to Clara, laying the foundation for Clara's role as a spiritual presence in the novel as she, consequently, becomes fearless, remaining unperturbed by the sudden appearance of even the most grotesque and ghastly figures in her room, or by the ominous knocks of imaginary devils and vampires at her bedroom window. (Allende 1993, 73).

Clara's spiritual existence transcends conventional realms or dimensions, enabling her to manifest the external universe within the confines of her dwelling. The protagonist exercises agency over the spatial dynamics within the household, asserting her preferences. In instances where alternative strategies are ineffective, she retreats to a distant area beyond Esteban's reach. This spatial analysis aligns with Marjorie Agosin's interpretation which states that Clara has "inhabited her own space and her own imagination" and so "evaded the presence of her spouse"(Agosin 1985, 452). In other words, Clara has discovered an escape from "authoritarian power" within the house through her magical traits. (Agosin 1985, 449). Even as a young girl, Clara has established the tendency to find alternate mental places in her father's home as a child. For instance, Clara has learned to "move objects without touching them," and to "predict the future and recognize people's intentions" (Allende 1993, 76). In the novel, the narrator tells us that Clara is able to foresee events such as her father's hernia, earthquakes, rare occurrences like snow falling in the capital city, and even the identity of a murderer before the police do. However, despite her accurate predictions, Clara's abilities are met with disbelief by those around her. This reflects disbelief in the supernatural or the extraordinary, even when evidence suggests otherwise, and underscores the isolation Clara may feel due to her unique gift (Allende 1993, 76). Clara's supernatural powers play a significant role in her life, and, as a result, they also have an impact on her family's lives, even though they tend to overlook them. From an early stage in her life, Clara has demonstrated the capacity to anticipate future events and perceive the underlying motives of individuals. The individual in question possesses the capacity to anticipate her father Severo's hernia, foresee her brother's incident while horseback riding, and even discern the identity of a local perpetrator before the police's discovery of the victim's remains. That type of imagination and "magical powers" is what separates her from the "real" world. Clara keeps her secret, the interior universe, even after she is married. In this way, she opposes the idea of men controlling their women throughout the novel in a culture where women do not usually have the authority to make their own decisions and can only be wives, mothers, or prostitutes. Clara's ability to see the dead and anticipate the future allows her to assist others. She also constructs a world in which only women can exist. That world is her house, the big house in the corner, which serves as a space for gatherings and meetings of spiritualists, writers, and various other eccentrics. These include groups such as "the Theosophists, the acupuncturists, the telepaths, the rainmakers, the Peripatetics, the Seventh-day Adventists" (Allende 1993, 211), in addition to the Mora sisters who "were students of spiritualism and supernatural phenomena" (Allende 1993, 124). Clara and the Mora sisters engage in activities including communication with spirits, using tarot cards, and employing Clara's table with three legs. The collective experience of these women encompasses both the hardships they endure under patriarchal systems of oppression and their active involvement and interconnectedness with other spheres of influence. The relationship between Clara and the Mora sisters depends on the implementation of the merging worlds through psychic communication. Upon the arrival of the three women at Clara's house, they "looked at

each other, recognized each other, smiled at each other," and "it was the beginning of a passionate spiritual friendship that was to last the remainder of their lives and, if their predictions have come true, must still be flourishing in the Hereafter" (Allende 1993, 124). This particular instance demonstrates an immediate bond among women, regardless of whether they reside in the physical realm or exist as spiritual entities.

The "big house on the corner" in Allende's novel is a symbol of the family, and the house naturally reflects that the family and the world exist only because of the differences between two groups: women and men. Allende spatially represents the division between men and women who are different, implying a spatial understanding of the division in which there is the private sphere where women are kept. For instance, Clara's magical abilities and the joy she experiences while enhancing her skills are captivating to marginalized individuals as she graciously invites them into her space. In addition, Clara generously provides food and shelter to those who are less fortunate. She allows these individuals to explore the outside world, which symbolizes her inner self, granting them access to a realm that Esteban is prohibited from entering. Her house represents her matriarchy, serving as a metaphor for the influential role women hold in Latin American literature. In *Female and Male in Latin America*, Ann Pescatello describes this concept:

The Latin American woman correctly perceives role differentiation as the key to her power and influence. Even the notions of the "separateness" and "mystery" of women, which are viewed in the North American context as male propaganda chiefly used to discriminate against women, are seen in the Latin American context as images to be enhanced, not destroyed (Pescatello 1979, 20).

Unsurprisingly, Esteban continuously opposes this "carnavalesque" of his house and the daily parade that passes through it. The term "carnavalesque" is influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, in which he states that the concept focuses on upsetting the cultural hierarchy where roles are switched and clowns are crowned. No one is banned or pushed aside, the marginalized is centered, and the unvoiced is voiced with authority. Power transforms, and authority shifts (Bakhtin 1984, 107). This explains why Esteban firmly states that the "big house on the corner" is not meant for passing through, and with a cold manner, he commands that the everyday "carnavalesque" should come to an end.

Clara's family has made a conscious effort to hide her powers, especially after an incident during her childhood when she has had an outburst in church. As a result of this outburst, the parish priest, Father Restrepo, has asserted Clara to be "possessed by the devil!" Clara's life is deeply influenced by her supernatural powers, which profoundly shape her experiences. She also shares her spiritual way of life with her children and granddaughter, Alba. In the novel, Clara's husband, Esteban, and even her son, Jaime, display indifference towards Clara's abilities. This portrayal of their behavior reflects the broader disregard towards women which is depicted in the story. Although Clara's family initially dismisses her magic, they often find themselves relying on her powers during times of great distress. This suggests that Clara's supernatural abilities hold more significance than her family initially presents them to be. In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende skillfully incorporates magical elements to emphasize the enigmatic aspects

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of the world. Through this, she ultimately presents a compelling argument for the ability of the supernatural to provide solace during times of hardship.

Consequently, while Esteban is out of town, Clara and her children, particularly Nicolis, maintain a lifestyle of personal freedom and occupy the desired space. When he returns, the atmosphere in the house undergoes a temporary change, and the party ends. Esteban faces an ongoing struggle to assert his dominance within the confines of the house while his family consistently resists with unwavering determination. Clara is forced to be influenced by her surrounding space because she is confined to a specific time and place and cannot legally divorce Esteban (Allende 1993, 91). She makes mental attempts to move objects and pushes the boundaries Esteban has set up in the "big house on the corner," turning it into "an enchanted labyrinth that was impossible to clean and that defied any number of state and city laws" (Allende 1993, 93). The word "labyrinth" is revealing since it alludes to a maze-like structure that lacks the male, linear order of a straight street and has the intuitive force of a woman's mind. A woman alters Esteban's flawless, rational environment, breaks free from his environment's confinements, and makes it her own. During Clara's lifetime, the battle for space reaches its peak with the help of her eccentric friends. Michael Handelsman proposes that the word "eccentrics" represents Clara's space, and this metaphor implies Clara's matriarchy. Therefore, the house represents Clara's need for a place to perform her endless magical ceremonies. The house becomes a microcosm reflecting the political and social changes occurring in the outside world. The house, once filled with Clara's whimsical imagination and spiritual beings, now becomes inundated with political propaganda and members of Esteban Trueba's political party. This influx of political influence gradually displaces Clara's presence within her own home, symbolized by her retinue being pushed into the background. The emergence of an invisible boundary within the house represents the growing divide between Esteban Trueba and Clara, reflecting their ideological differences and strained relationship. In *Feminism and Geography*, Gillian Rose states that the concept of home is not inherently natural or neutral, but is rather a socially produced phenomenon that is intricately connected to the human experience: "Space then is not an anterior actant to be filled or spanned or constructed ... [i]nstead, space is practised, a matrix of play, dynamic and iterative, its forms and shapes produced through the citational performance of self-other relations" (Rose 1999, 248). Rose states that spatial feminism acknowledges both the dominant discourse and the potential for resistance. Consequently, this portrayal positions the female protagonist as simultaneously occupying both peripheral and central roles, being influenced by and resisting the patriarchal dynamics embedded within her environment. Not only does this characterization render her as a subject but also as a challenger. In this way, through magic, Clara triumphs in "the big house on the corner," where she has fought for her freedom. Despite the fact that the "façade of the house underwent no alterations" (Allende 1993, 226), Clara owns and dominates the home's most private spaces. Even "the rear garden," previously a perfect, rigid emulation of "a French garden," has become hers; "tangled jungle in which every type of plant and flower had proliferated and where her birds kept up a steady din, along with many generations of cats and dogs" (Allende 1993, 226). Clara is the owner of the property, as "an invisible border arose between the parts of the house occupied by Esteban and those occupied by his wife" (Allende 1993, 225).

The "invisible" spatial division within the house is a sign of Esteban's severed connection and the separation of the sexes, as the house has historically represented the unity of its residents.

In "The House of the Spirits: Look, Space, Discourse of the Other Story," Rena Campos examines the correlation between the house and the character Clara. According to her, the house serves as the realm where the mother's imagination is manifested (Campos 1986, 24). Agosin further asserts that Clara has a distinct presence in her own space and imagination. She intentionally avoids her husband's presence and has a tendency to seek out alternative mental spaces, a habit she has developed during her childhood in her father's home (Agosin 1985, 452). Clara seeks solace from her immediate surroundings by engaging in activities such as reading books or envisioning herself in distant locations. Clara's belief in her magical abilities and efforts to manipulate objects using her mind creates a sense of detachment from the real world (Agosin 1985, 452). By changing its layout, the house has become a symbol of Clara rather than Esteban. The house that Esteban has long dreamed of, designed, and constructed is no longer there. Instead of being a mirror of him, as he has hoped, his house is now a reflection of his wife, their family, and their relationship with him. One could even say that the house has a feminine presence. Despite the apparent dominance of patriarchal structures, women exert their influence covertly, a message Allende conveys in this novel through using spatial metaphors.

One example is evident through Clara's reaction to Esteban's physical violence after he hits her and knocks out her teeth while defending her kid (Allende 1993, 299). After initially ignoring him, she eventually shuts herself up in her room. Based on Rose's observation, the women's social regulations confine women primarily to the private domain, resulting in a state of displacement or lack of a specific place. While women may face the risk of violence within their households or immediate communities, patriarchal norms hinder their ability to acquire the essential agency to extricate themselves from this perilous environment (Rose 1993, 35). Clara's resistance to Esteban's entry into her private space (her bedroom, her body) proves to be an effective weapon. That she would never again engage in verbal communication with Esteban is an even more substantial change in her character. Esteban has built and decorated Clara's room to control her, but she successfully uses his personal space against him. Some have misread both of these moves as passive, but spatial analysis shows that Clara is everything but silent in the novel. Therefore, the concept of space takes on a new interpretation as a personal space for creativity and imagination. Clara has already told the masculine body that it is not welcome in her feminine universe, and now she vows never to speak in a masculine way. More than frustrated, Esteban feels defeated because he cannot even influence Clara's soul (Allende 1993, 368).

After her death, Clara serves as the driving force behind the enchanting universe of the big house. Her death marks the end of the spiritual energy and ever-changing architectural design that define it (Allende 1993, 299). In the absence of Clara's feminine presence to balance Esteban's aggressive, masculine energy, there is a lack of motivation to repair the cracks in the walls or the broken furniture. Therefore, the house becomes a ruin after Clara dies (Allende 1993, 299). Esteban eventually admits that he has accepted his wife's strong interest in the supernatural because he deeply loves her. Therefore,

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magic serves as a symbol of the strength of women and their practical skills and abilities that might change one's perspective.

Years after Clara's death, Esteban finds himself alone in the grand house on the corner, accompanied only by his granddaughter, Alba. In this solitude, he becomes fearful of the creepy sounds that seem to echo through the halls, fearing the presence of lingering spirits and ghosts. However, all of Esteban's doubts vanish whenever he encounters Clara's ghost in the halls or hears her laughter on the terrace (Allende 1993, 392). Clara possesses an innate gift for communicating with spirits, a talent that persists even after her passing, enabling her to maintain contact with the living. Esteban firmly believes that Clara possesses a unique power, which brings him great solace as he enters his old age. Moreover, Alba, who is arrested amidst the military coup, endures the horrifying ordeal of torture and sexual assault at the hands of the police. In her darkest moments, she calls upon the compassionate spirits of her grandmother, seeking solace and assistance in finding release from her suffering. Although the spirits do not manifest themselves, Clara does make an appearance in Alba's semi-conscious state, providing her with strength and a sense of inner peace. Similar to her grandfather, Alba has initially displayed minimal interest in Clara's magic, but her attitude changes when she finds herself in a situation where she requires it. Alba has held great admiration for her grandmother, referring to her as "the soul of the big house on the corner" (Allende 1993, 286).

Upon Clara's death, Alba comprehends that their physical separation will not diminish their spiritual connection. During Alba's imprisonment, Clara's ghostly presence manifests to Alba, encouraging her to defy mortality and reclaim her existence via the act of writing. It is noteworthy that Alba frequently refers to the presence of spirits and ghosts within the household, as well as the mystical abilities that Clara and her spiritualist acquaintances possess. Alba's perspective, being an extension of Clara's, leads her to perceive these miraculous occurrences as entirely ordinary and unquestionably authentic. For example, she seems to accept talking about "the glorious past of visiting spirits and flying tables in the big house" (Allende 1993, 332).

Alba and Clara's interactions in the blending realms reflect their empowerment. Clara encourages Alba to speak up for women who have been subjected to patriarchal and political tyranny, and she instructs her to document their experiences in writing. In order to show how her female characters reject staying submissive in a patriarchal society, Clara assigns Alba the responsibility of exposing the ugly facts of the hardships women endure at the hands of men (Allende 1993, 417). Alba's textual creation, confined solely within the realm of her imagination, serves as her personal escape amidst a chaotic environment, much like how Clara's written accounts have emancipated her from the unrestrained aggression of Esteban. In that way, Alba commences the composition of her secret manuscript, which encapsulates the essence of existence that "bore witness to life" (Allende 1993, 435).

As with many magic realist works, one of the primary aims of *The House of the Spirits* is to give voice to members of society who have been marginalized and silenced and thus have no outlet for expressing their unique perspective on the world. By reading Alba's narrative, Allende is able to reclaim the long-neglected perspectives of all women in history, including those she has met and been impacted by. Meyer paraphrases Cixous as arguing that women have a heightened awareness of "hidden" truths, but

this sense is kept "liv[ing] in dreams, embodied but still deadly silent, in silences, in voiceless rebellions" (quoted in Meyer 1990, 360). Clara has effectively imparted to Alba the notion that the spiritual realm, which transcends the observable world, serves as a conduit for fostering unity and facilitating interpersonal connections. The composite voice, which Alba considers crucial for societal development, embraces the supernatural and the spiritual as inherently ordinary.

At the end of the novel, Esteban passes away as an old man. Alba firmly believes that Clara's spirit is present during his passing. At first, Clara is described as nothing more than a mysterious glow. However, as Esteban gradually overcomes the anger that has consumed him during his lifetime, Clara begins to manifest herself in her most vibrant form. She appears as if she is at her happiest with a broad smile, and she playfully energizes the other spirits as she gracefully moves through the house. Esteban finds solace in Clara's ghostly presence and supernatural abilities, allowing him to pass away contentedly while whispering her name: Clara, the epitome of clarity and clairvoyance. This highlights how the supernatural, in the novel, possesses the remarkable ability to provide solace in moments of immense hardship. Family, Clara, and her supernatural abilities are all represented by the big house on the corner where the Trueba family has lived for generations. Even though the rest of the family does not realize it until after Clara's death, Alba considers her the "soul" of the enormous house on the corner.

When Clara passes away while Alba is only seven years old, the home quickly begins to fall apart. The blinds and drapes are drawn, the flowers in the vases wither, and the roof tiles begin to crack. The rest of the home slips into disrepair over the years, but Esteban keeps Clara's room tightly locked so he can locate her ghost anytime he likes. "Everybody else learned it later when Clara died, and the house lost its flowers, its nomadic friends, and its playful spirits and entered into an era of decline" (Allende 1993, 286). In other words, the residence gradually descends into a condition of disregard and deterioration in Clara's absence. Clara has assumed a central role within the family, diligently upholding the household's organization and fostering an enchanting atmosphere. Therefore, the enchantment of the mansion diminishes, and Esteban's intense preoccupation with politics and wealth creates a significant divide between him and the rest of his family. Consequently, the house serves as a mirror of the gradual breakdown of the Trueba family. As Esteban endeavors to exert control over the women in his life within the structures he has constructed for them, Clara and the women of the family have battled for their freedom.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the novel revolves around Clara's world, populated by women who creatively defy society. Clara creates her own world within her house, separated from her husband's. She has the magical powers to help people, to control her space, and to decide who can be part of that world. Clara has a stronger connection with the women in her house than her husband. She also influences future generations to live happy, independent lives, as shown in Alba's decisions to fight for women's rights.



## بيت تروبا: حصن نسوي في عالم الليندي الواقعي السحري بيت الأرواح

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### الملخص

يبحث هذا المقال استخدام إيزابيل الليندي في روايتها "بيت الأرواح" أساليب الواقعية السحرية لتحويل المساحة المحدودة للمنزل إلى مكان لتقوية المرأة. في حين أن الشخصيات النسائية في الرواية تقتصر في البداية على المجال المنزلي، إلا أنها تدريجياً تتخطى الحدود بين الحقلين العام والخاص، مشكلاً في النهاية تحدياً للنظام الذكوري. إن تصوير الرواية لمنزل تروبا، بهندسته المعمارية الغامضة والأحداث الخارقة للطبيعة، يطمس الحدود بين العالمين الطبيعي والميتافيزيائي. فيعكس هذا الطمس الوسائل التي تتجاوز بها الشخصيات النسائية حدود الفضاء المنزلي بحيث تعطل قدرات كلارا النفسية وطبيعة المنزل الواعية المفاهيم التقليدية لسلبية الأنثى وحياتها المنزلية. تساهم هذه الدراسة بالمجل بتقديمها دراسة نقدية لعمل الليندي من خلال تسليط الضوء على الاستخدام المبتكر للواقعية السحرية في الرواية لإعادة تصور المجال المنزلي كموقع للقوة والمقاومة الأنثوية. في حين أن الباحثين السابقين قاموا بدراسة الديناميكيات الجندرية في روايات الليندي، تقدم هذه الدراسة منظوراً جديداً من خلال التركيز على دور المنزل نفسه كعامل مجازي وغير طبيعي لتمكين المرأة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المساحة المنزلية، المنزل، إيزابيل الليندي، الواقعية السحرية، المقاومة.

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