

<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n3.14>

Textual Labyrinthine Spaces in the Select Works of Isabel Allende

Dr. Athulya Thankachy V. R.

Assistant Professor,
Department of English
Iqbal College, Peringammala,
University of Kerala

Email: athulyavr1987@gmail.com



<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3810-8628>

Abstract

The chaotic political history of Chile has long been scrutinised by writers who have recognised the importance of addressing alternative histories of suppressed groups on the land through their literary narratives. Chilean novelist Isabel Allende belonged to the group of writers who had adopted several narrative strategies to expose alternate histories in order to make the readers understand the power plays inherent in their land. The textual architecture of the labyrinth, a concept discussed by Faith N. Mishina in *Gabriel García Márquez: A Subversive Agenda*, can be applied to the works selected for discussion in this paper. This concept works against the labyrinths of power structures, class differences and other hidden agendas generated by the authorities to safeguard their political motives without any form of resistance. How the select literary narratives of Isabel Allende deconstruct such labyrinths used to trap common people is the central concern of this paper. The empowering nature of textual labyrinths is also discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Post Boom, Chilean official history, Pinochet, labyrinths of power structures, class differences, textual labyrinths and empowerment

Chilean novelist Isabel Allende's literary endeavours have brought in an innovative change in the thought processes of the reading public worldwide. Being a part of the Post Boom phase in

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Latin American literature, she indulged herself in freeing Latin American literature from the Magical Realistic tendencies, identified as the characteristic feature of literary works in Latin America till Post Boom. Writers like Gabriel García Márquez had strictly opposed the attempts of imperial nations to measure the intensity of the works produced in the Latin American region using the Western yardstick. The political turbulence of many regions in Latin America, like Colombia and Chile, gained critical attention through the works of the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Gabriel García Márquez and also through the literary initiatives of the prominent women writer Isabel Allende.

The complex history of Chile had to go through several erasures and distortions right from the colonial period. Official historiographic records had deliberately attempted to manipulate the resistance narratives to protect the personal interests of the powerful in Chile. Isabel Allende's novels, like *Of Love and Shadows* (1984) and *The House of the Spirits* (1982), provide testimony to this. The various strategies adopted by the authorities and patriarchy in annihilating traces of resistance from official historiographic records are discussed in the above-mentioned works. This paper attempts to discuss the commitment of a writer like Isabel Allende in exposing such strategies of oppression adopted by the powerful to hinder the growth of counterhistories. Her works become textual labyrinths, which are spaces open for the readers to develop their own perceptions and counter stories. Isabel Allende says:

I feel that writing is an act of hope, a sort of communion with our fellow men. The writer of goodwill carries a lamp to illuminate the dark corners. Only that, nothing more, a tiny beam of light to show some hidden aspect of reality, to help decipher and understand it and thus to imitate, if possible, a change in the conscience of some readers (48).

Isabel Allende felt that it was her duty as a writer to alter the inherent beliefs and perspectives in the minds of her readers regarding the authenticity of Chilean official records. Chilean official history was scrutinised by Isabel Allende because of the several mismatches and gaps vividly visible in it. Military juntas and dictatorships had forged most of the public records to resist any form of counter movements against them. They had deliberately created a unified version of official history to protect their interests and power. Writers like Isabel Allende had attempted to deconstruct such purposeful manipulations by adopting narrative strategies like textual labyrinthine structures.

Allende's novels, *The House of the Spirits* and *Love and Shadows*, attempt to depict the turbulent phases in the Chilean political history during General Augusto Pinochet's rule. Both these works challenge the power labyrinths generated by Pinochet and his secret police to prevent resistance against their dominance. The notion of the classical Cretan labyrinth is utilised by the writer to find out similarities between King Minos's palace and General Pinochet's regime. "The top portion of King Minos's palace 'was for civic functions and social duties (daylight and transparency); the bottom portion of the palace was a descent into chaos and ritualistic blood sacrifice (the passage through darkness, death and rebirth)" (Marquez 11). Similarly, General Pinochet and his military attempted to hide their deviant activities by

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manipulating the common people. They generated the impression of transparency before people, thereby engaging themselves in inflicting brutalities upon the common folk.

House of the Spirits, the debut novel of Isabel Allende, was originally published in 1982. The novel narrates the story of the Trueba family. The existence of several labyrinthine power structures visible in Chilean society during that time is detailed in the novel. The dominance of patriarchy and class differences predominate in the novel. Allende began writing this novel after receiving the news that her grandfather was dying. She began writing him a letter, which later developed into this novel. The socio-political upheavals of Chile characterise the setting of the novel, which portrays an unnamed country. *The House of the Spirits* depicts the labyrinths of patriarchal dominance through the portrayal of Esteban Trueba, the patriarch of the Trueba family. Esteban saw the tenants of his estate Tres Marias, as objects of exploitation. He raped several women in that estate during his stay there. He had to pay back for the exploitation of a woman called Pancha García through her grandson Esteban García, who had raped Trueba's granddaughter Alba as retribution. Such cycles of violence can be looked upon as power labyrinths used to trap common people.

Class differences constituted Chilean society all the time. In the novel, the intensity with which Esteban Trueba opposes his daughter Blanca's affair with her childhood playmate, Pedro Tercero García. Labyrinths of class differences have always been a constant feature in Latin American society. Exploitation of women can also be seen as a power labyrinth used to trap people. Esteban Trueba's approach towards women in his estate and Esteban García's revenge towards Alba in prison unravels the complexity of the situation. The counter strategies adopted by the women characters in the novel emphasise the narrative possibilities opened up by the writer Isabel Allende to find an exit from such power labyrinths that suppress people. Such countermeasures constitute the textual labyrinthine structure of Allende.

Textual labyrinths can be compared with the Minotaur's labyrinth constructed under King Minos's palace. Those who entered into Minotaur's labyrinth found it very difficult to find the exit. They fell prey to the half-bull, half-man Minotaur. Similarly, readers who enter into the textual labyrinthine architecture of Isabel Allende will be trapped inside the plot of the narrative. Those who fail to identify the deep structures or the resistance strategies incorporated into the works will perish there themselves. But those who imbibe the true spirit of the work will find an exit from the labyrinth like Theseus, who had killed the Minotaur.

In the novel *The House of the Spirits*, the three women characters, Clara, Blanca, and Alba, found their exits from the repressive measures adopted by the patriarchy around them. Clara used silence as her weapon against the domineering patriarchy imposed upon her by her husband, Esteban Trueba. Their daughter, Blanca, opposed her father's class differences by giving birth to her lover's daughter, Alba. They finally overcame all the tribulations and became one. Alba, the most powerful woman character in the novel, had to face great torture in the prison from the military of Pinochet, especially Esteban García. Alba states:

They stripped her violently, pulling off her slacks despite her kicking... Two hands lifted her, and four laid her on a cold, hard metal cot with springs that hurt her back and

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bound her wrists and ankles with leather thongs... Then she felt the atrocious pain that coursed through her body, filling it completely and that she would never forget as long as she lived. She sank into darkness (409).

It was the spirit of her grandmother Clara who had helped Alba to overcome such tortures. “(Clara) suggested that she writes a testimony that might one day call attention to the terrible secret she was living through, so that the world would know about this horror that was taking place parallel to the peaceful existence of those who didn’t want to know...” (414). The other women in the concentration camp also urged Alba to record their struggles. Thus, Alba found an exit from the labyrinths of power structures as an empowered woman.

The next novel, *Of Love and Shadows* by Isabel Allende, also depicts the condition of people trapped in Pinochet’s regime. This work also portrays labyrinths of class differences as seen in *The House of the Spirits*.

The plotline of the novel is inspired by real events, primarily journalistic accounts taken from magazines, newspapers and unpublished interviews that Allende gleaned during her pre-exile years as a journalist in Chile and then later as a writer and researcher in her new home in Venezuela (Allende 50).

Nana Rosa in *Of Love and Shadows* was a motherly figure to the central character of the novel, Irene Beltrán. Her biological mother, Beatriz, gave more importance to her social status than to her daughter. Her “energy and money go into preserving her looks against the ravages of age, a full-time job rewarded by the young lover who meets her for bacchanalian vacations around the globe” (Cox 63). On the other hand, Rosa, the housekeeper of Beatriz, extended her support to Irene Beltrán in all her difficult times. Even though Rosa was an uneducated black woman, she was capable enough to create a space for herself in her white mistress’s house. She was a strong lady who had sacrificed everything for Irene.

During Irene’s formative years, Rosa became the victim of an illegitimate pregnancy. On one occasion, the young Irene went in search of her and discovered Rosa lying in her room, covered in blood, with the lifeless body of her infant at her feet. When questioned, Rosa told Irene that the baby “fell in through the skylight” and implored her to “keep it a secret from the family” (138). In response, Irene assisted Rosa in burying the infant in the garden, where Rosa later planted forget-me-nots to mark the burial site. Rosa never disclosed any details about the traumatic circumstances that led to her pregnancy, maintaining a silence about this deeply personal suffering. However, in stark contrast, she was vocal and courageous when it came to denouncing the brutalities of military dictatorship. Rosa, a Black domestic worker, consistently demonstrated greater fortitude than her white mistress in condemning governmental corruption and authoritarian violence. Through these actions, Nana Rosa emerges as a compelling figure who defies the entrenched hierarchies of race and class that characterized Chilean society at the time, asserting a voice of resistance and moral clarity in a deeply stratified social order.

The novel *Of Love and Shadows* attempts to break the labyrinths of power structures created by the secret police of Pinochet. They had attempted to erase even minor forms of resistance against Pinochet. The novel unravels the condition of “desaparecidos, or the ones

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who have disappeared without a trace” (Cox 65). These unfortunate people were erased by the secret police of Pinochet as they indulged themselves in resisting the tortures of Pinochet. The central characters of the novel Irene Beltrán and Francisco discovered the secret grave where these desaparecidos were buried. Through this discovery they had exposed the political atrocities inflicted upon the Chileans by Pinochet and his men.

Irene Beltrán can be seen as the fictional counterpart of the novelist herself. The incidents narrated in this novel are closely connected with Allende’s journalistic experiences. Isabel Allende, in her memoir *My Invented Country* (2003), states that:

In the seventies, when I was working as a journalist, I happened to write an article about a girl who was credited with having the gift of prophecy and a faculty for curing animals and restoring dead engines to working order. The humble little house where she lived was filled with the country folk who came every day, always at the same hour, to witness her discreet miracles..... I had the opportunity to attend a couple of these events, and I witnessed the trance, during which the young saint displayed the extraordinary physical strength of a gladiator, but I don’t recall any rocks from the skies or quaking earth.... No matter that the phenomenon was reported in the newspapers and people’s interest in the saint kept rising until the army came and put an end to everything in its way (60).

Thus, the central characters of the novel, along with the help of the church, became successful in exposing the labyrinths of power structures capable enough to erase even traces of human beings from the public domain. Thus, they find their exit from such labyrinths through the textual architecture of Isabel Allende. The readers who imbibe the resistance spirit unravelled by the characters will also find their exits from the textual labyrinths. Enlightenment of the readers is what is expected from the creation of such textual labyrinths. It is important for the readers to become aware of the turbulent socio-political situations existing in their societies or any society. They should become empowered enough to raise their voice against such harsh conditions. This is the ultimate aim of textual labyrinths.

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