

Allende's Advocacy for Armed Revolution in *The House of the Spirits*: A Reflection of Reality in Fiction

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Abstract:

Isabel Allende's first novel The House of the Spirits not only endorses magical realism, popularized by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in the 1960s but also makes a reflection on Chile's socialist movement. The central events of the novel move around Salvador Allende's accession in power through democratically held election, his attempts to introduce parliamentary socialism in the country, the 1973 military coup and decimation of socialist/communist leaders/cadres in Chile. Allende's rise and fall brought new issues in Chile in particular and Latin America in general: whether socialism through an armed revolution like Cuba or through democratic election like Chile. The Latin American intelligentsia was divided into two groups. In this article, I am making an argument that Isabel Allende rejects the prospect of socialism through the democratic election and stands in favor of the armed revolution. Allende makes advocacy that it's only the armed revolution that can introduce sustainable socialism in Chile as well as in Latin America.

Keywords: Socialism, communism, democracy, parliament, armed struggle, armed revolution, military, coup, guerilla warfare

Cuba and Chile drew the attention of the world communist thinkers and intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century. Fidel Castro defeated the Batista government of Cuba in 1959 and remained in power more than half a century. On the other hand, Salvador Allende became first democratically elected socialist president of Chile in 1970 but he was brutally murdered by the army in 1973. Castro had been able to defeat the Batista government in the second attempt of his armed insurrection in the interval of six years, whereas Salvador Allende had lost two elections (1958, 1964) before he was finally elected the president of Chile in September 1970. Salvador Allende's rise and fall in politics raised several questions in contemporary Latin American countries; the questions were related to the ongoing socialist movement in the continent. A group of thinkers was in the opinion that it's only the armed revolution that determines the destiny of Latin American socialist movement. This group pointed out the examples of Cuba and Chile as the testimonies. Still another group believed that parliamentary socialism could pave the way in the process of reordering and restructuring society towards the evolutionary direction of socialism. Amidst this debate, Isabel Allende in her novel *The House of the Spirits*, written in the periphery of Chilean coup of 1973, makes

a strong plea that only the armed revolution can decide the fate of Latin American socialist movement.

The military coup of Chile on 11 September 1973 not only brought the end of a democratically elected left-wing government it also raised many questions in the future of Latin America's socialist movement. In an article, "Parliamentary Socialism and Class Struggle" written one year after the coup, T. V. Sathyamurthy brought the issue about the direction of the left movement in Chile to the surface. Sathyamurthy remarked, "The Chilean coup has revived the political debate within the Left between two opposing ideas—one of achieving socialism through parliamentary means, and the other of undertaking socialist transformation by revolutionary means inevitably involving armed struggle" (584). Sathyamurthy pointed out that even the leaders of Allende's government were suspicious about the future of the socialist government that had come to power through bourgeois ways of election and some of them had taken it as a tactic or an experiment. Sathyamurthy revealed it, "The Secretary-General of the socialist party Carlos Altamirano was a strong advocate of the view that under Chilean conditions, a tactical armory consisting solely of the parliamentary and constitutional means of bringing about socialist transformation was doomed to failure" (585). Isabel Allende, an active intellectual and journalist in 1970s must have been familiar with the debate and so she came up with her views in *The House of the Spirits*, where she has denounced the parliamentary practice of socialist transformation and has openly advocated for socialism through armed revolution.

Before coming to the main point of discussion whether socialism through election or through armed revolution, Allende reviews the material history of the unnamed country (Chile) from the second decade of the twentieth century onwards before describing the events of the 1970s. True to the first sentence of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle," Allende presents the history of the unnamed country in the novel with conflicts and confrontations. The novelist willingly delves the history of the country in order to show the dialectics of conflicts and confrontation. She does not see the coup in isolation, rather sees it as a successive outcome of a long struggle and confrontation of social forces.

The confrontation starts with the elite parties, the conflict between the liberals and the conservatives, a characteristic political conflict in Latin American countries after the Independence. She brings two parties into the front and shows them in conflict for the sheer ambition of political power. It cannot properly be called a class struggle because both parties represent the creoles, the American born whites. A gift of poisoned brandy, in the house of a liberal leader Severo del Valle, takes a girl's life. Rosa, Severo's second youngest daughter dies after tasting the brandy. In the literal level, the sabotage can be understood in relation to party politics between the conservatives and the liberals in Latin American countries in the late 19th and early 20th century but Allende attaches far-

reaching significance with this incident. Commenting on the crowd of people that gathers in Rosa's funeral, the novelist gives a hint about the future repercussions, "No political gathering managed to attract so many people until half a century later, when the first Marxist candidate attempted, through strictly democratic channels, to become President" (13). Thus the novelist establishes a linkage between the events fifty years apart.

After introducing the nature of the conflict between two elite parties in an urban area, Allende takes the readers to the countryside to show the class struggle in the agricultural haciendas. She shows the conflict between the peon peasants and Esteban Trueba, the patron of the hacienda called Tres Marias. Esteban Trueba is Allende's deliberate creation to manifest a prototype bourgeois and conservative leader, a strong representative barricade of the socialist movement in the country. Sara E. Cooper gives the similar perception of Esteban Trueba, "Esteban comes to embody the oppressive and the violent patron that rules his family and all of his domain with an iron fist, just as a long line of conservative leaders will rule the country" (22). Robert Antony complements Cooper, "Trueba is the novel's hyperbolic macho—dictator in his home, patron and rapist on his estate, and bastion of 'democracy' in government house" (20). Agreeing Cooper and Antony, Peter G Earle still puts Esteban Trueba in the center of the conflict, "The dramatic nucleus of the book is the struggle between Trueba and the forces he generates, on the one hand, and the female members of his family, on the other hand" (550). In the conflict between the landlord and the peasants, Esteban Trueba exploits the peasants and earns surplus income from the labor of the agricultural proletariats.

The conflict between the landlord and peasant has been presented through an analogy of a fox and hens. The fox used to come to the chicken coop every night to steal the eggs and baby chicks. One day all the hens decide to confront the fox and wait for his arrival. The hens block his path, surround him and peck him nearly to death. The hens make the fox run away with his tail between his legs. The story makes a lasting effect on a young boy named Pedro Tercero. A click comes in young Tercero's mind and he converts the story into a song and sings it with his guitar. One day he sings the song in front of Esteban Trueba, who makes the reaction as "the stupidest things that can be set to music. You'd be better off learning love songs" (154). Pedro Tercero strengthens his position and replies Esteban Trueba, "I like this *patron*. In union, there is a strength, as Father Jose Dulce Maria says. If the hens can overcome the fox, what about human beings" (154). Allende deliberately introduces Pedro Tercero as an antidote to Esteban Trueba's outrages in the hacienda, for it's this boy who takes the leadership of class struggle in the hacienda. But Esteban Trueba never realizes his mistakes and remains adamant to the change as Cooper writes about him, "Esteban Trueba contentedly establishes himself as a powerful and successful feudal lord, ignoring any sign of social or political change that occurs beyond his property line" (25). Carolyn Pinet argues that Allende purposefully incorporated the analogy in the story because, according to her, she

wanted to demonstrate “the potential power of an oppressed group of people through their own tradition and voice” (59). Allende gradually consolidates the environment of conflict between two opposing classes.

Allende shows the hacienda peasants in extreme exploitation to relate it with the principle of repression and resistance. Because of the outrages done to the peasants by the landlord, the peasants begin to go against him. The socialist leaders take advantage of the gap between the patron and peasants and new ideas to begin to emerge in the hacienda. The socialist candidate starts his election campaign aggressively but it creates a bipolar situation within the socialist group. Allende strongly brings the issue into the discussion: whether socialism through election or through revolution. The novelist brings the debate into the front through two representative characters, Jaime and Miguel, representing the parliamentary process and revolutionary method of socialist transformation respectively. Jaime Trueba, Esteban Trueba’s son and a medical doctor favors parliamentary process and Miguel, a person of the working-class family stands for armed revolution. Allende makes comparison and contrast between these two characters and gradually builds up her view that only armed revolution can change the destiny of Chile’s socialist movement.

Jaime Trueba advocates socialism through peaceful means, by a democratically held election. As a medical doctor by profession, he opposes Miguel’s views of extremity. The narrator speaks of him, “Jaime was convinced that after so many years of struggle the Socialists are going to win” (332). Jaime’s niece Alba would answer him repeating Miguel’s words, “that only through armed struggle could the bourgeoisie be toppled” (333). Jaime had been predicting the socialist majority in the election for many years but every time he was proved wrong. When the election campaign of the socialist candidate creates whim throughout the country, both Alba and Jaime become euphoric but Miguel expresses his objection. He explains that, “. . . the election was a joke and that whoever won, it would make no difference because you would just be changing the needle on the same old syringe and that you cannot make a revolution at the ballot box but only with the people’s blood” (335). When Alba reports Miguel’s words to Jaime, he replies, “That boy is crazy. We’re going to win and he’ll have to swallow his words.” (335). Allende, thus, makes two characters speak of for the same end but through different means.

Allende introduces Miguel as a typical character in the eleventh chapter of the novel. Miguel is the one who expresses his strong commitment to socialism through revolution. The narrator talks about him, “Miguel talked about revolution. He said that the violence of the system needed to be answered with the violence of revolution” (319). As a student leader in a university, Miguel gives good leadership without being noticed by security forces. He does not have faith that socialism would ever come through the democratic election and he openly expresses his conviction to Alba, “Bad times are coming, my love. I can’t have you with me, because when it becomes necessary I am

going to join the guerrillas” (331). The novelist builds up the character of Miguel in the image of Che Guevara. After the success of the Cuban Revolution, Che Guevara published a book entitled *Guerilla Warfare* in which he highlighted how and why Revolution was successful in Cuba. Miguel’s remarks on revolution resemble Che’s popular quotation “popular movement can win the war against the army” (GW 1). Allende expounds Che’s firm faith in guerrilla warfare, the only way of establishing socialism in the American continent through Miguel.

From the very beginning, Miguel was a skeptic on the success of socialism through the democratically held election. His conviction of armed revolution remains the same even after the victory in the presidential elections. Miguel distributes Alba’s thefts to the factory workers with political pamphlets “calling on people to join in an armed struggle to bring down the oligarchy” (351). But no one pays attention to Miguel’s campaigns. The narrator comments on people’s behavior, “They were convinced that since they had come to power through legal means, no one could take it away from them at least not until the next Presidential election” (351). The novelist is bringing the issue towards maturation describing the convictions of both groups of people: one still believing in the ballot and the other seeing the urgency of the bullet. Attacking on blind faith on the ballot, Miguel remarks, “They’re fools! They don’t realize that the right is arming itself” (351). The novelist deliberately creates Miguel to represent one stream of Marxist faith that the reply of the bullet must be given by bullets.

The novelist still strengthens the debate between peaceful evolution to socialism and armed revolution by showing the contradiction between Jaime and Miguel. Alba and Jaime find weapons in Senator Trueba’s house. Alba wants to hand over the confiscated weapons to Miguel but Jaime goes against her proposal. Jaime replies Alba, “Miguel was not less a terrorist than her grandfather and that it would be better to get rid of them in such a way that they would not harm anyone” (352). Both Jaime and Miguel are the followers of socialism but they have a big gap in understanding the means of attainment. Alba and Jaime think of different ways of disposing of them and finally decide “to bury them in plastic bags in a safe, secret location, in case they were ever needed for a nobler cause” (352). The novelist insistently brings contrast between Miguel and Jaime. The narrator writes about Miguel, who, “. . . still believed that it would be impossible to defeat the right without a violent revolution. Jaime didn’t agree, but he was fond of Miguel and admired his courage” (354). For the time being the novelist takes a middle stance and the weapons are buried safely, which proves the novelist’s conviction that the weapons may be needed one day.

After the military coup, many socialist/communist leaders including Dr. Jaime Trueba are killed by the army, at least Miguel survives. In fact, Allende saves Miguel as the symbol/image of armed revolution, the last resort of change in the country. The narrator talks about him, “Miguel had become one of the guerrilla leaders, fulfilling the

destiny he had been moving toward ever since he was a teenager. . . . He fought clandestinely, faithful to his theory that the violence of the rich must be met by the violence of the people” (396). This quotation of the novel resembles with a quotation of Mao, who once said “War is the highest form of struggle for resolving contradictions, when they have developed to a certain stage, between classes, nations, states, or political groups, and it has existed ever since the emergence of private property and of classes”(180). The novelist builds up the argument that the option of a communist/socialist revolution through armed insurgency is yet to be practiced.

The novelist carries Miguel’s role still further. He is very clear about what the communists call “class enemy¹.” Though Miguel loves Alba, he hates her grandfather as his class enemy. He speaks about Esteban Trueba, “He who lives by the sword must die by the sword. Maybe I’ll kill him myself one of these days” (397). Alba agrees to hand over the weapons, which were hidden by her and her uncle Jaime in the mountains, to Miguel. She goes to the mountains with some children in the excuse of picnic and shows the locations where the weapons were buried. This episode cannot be taken as a coincidence. The novelist wants to give a message that the weapons and the people who handle the weapons are still intact. Why is the revolution needed in Latin America? The novelist gives an answer to this question with a dramatic conversation between Miguel and Alba:

“I’m scared, Miguel,” Alba said. “Aren’t we ever going to be able to lead a normal life? Why don’t we go abroad? Why don’t we escape now, while we still can?”

Miguel pointed to the children, and Alba understood what he meant. “Then let me go with you” she begged, as she had so many times before.

(398).

Allende infers that Miguel’s signal makes Alba think about the future of those innocent children, the future citizens of the country. The children would suffer if there is no revolution and if the army continues to rule for an indefinite period of time.

Miguel has survived and Alba is pregnant, perhaps she is carrying Miguel’s baby in her belly. Allende uses Alba as her spokesperson and makes her utter her own version. Alba thinks:

It would be very difficult for me to avenge all those who should be avenged because my revenge would be just another part of the same inexorable rite. I have to break that terrible chain. I want to think that my task in life and that my mission is not to prolong hatred but simply fill these pages while I wait for Miguel, while I bury my grandfather, whose body lies beside me in this room, while I wait for better times to come, while I carry this child in

¹ Class enemy is a term used in communism to refer to a person or social group of people who are seen as "enemies" of the revolution.

my womb, the daughter of so many rapes or perhaps of Miguel, but above all, my own daughter. (432)

The death of Esteban Trueba signals the end of classical capitalism and Alba's wait for "better time" symbolizes the end of military regime and arrival of socialism, for the concept of socialism exists with Miguel and with supposedly Miguel's child in her womb. Allende ends the novel with hope, the hope of revolution. As a niece of assassinated president Salvador Allende, Isabel Allende has transformed her grief into creative writing. Jaime was killed by the army in the very morning of the coup, and with his death, the tactic or experiment of bringing social justice through democratic election has been disillusioned but all the possibilities are not exhausted. Still, there is one option left, the road of revolution through armed struggle or guerrilla warfare. She ends the novel with a message that Miguel, the brain of armed revolution is still alive and the option of socialist revolution is still undamaged in Latin America. Thus, Allende transcribes the ground reality of Chile in her novel, reality being reflected in fiction.

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