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PORTRAYAL OF MOTHERHOOD IN THE SELECT STORIES OF ISABEL ALLENDE

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Abstract

Isabel Allende, the Chilean American novelist and short story writer become renowned with the publication of her debut novel *The House of the Spirits* in 1982. Though she is known for magical realism, she is also a writer who helps us see the psyche of her characters. She has written many novels, memoirs, short stories and plays. Her novels deal with various socio-political issues in Latin America with the backdrop of historical events. And as a feminist, she portrays the struggles women face in each phase of her life. The stories selected for the study, *Clarisa*, *The Judge's Wife* and *The Gold of Tomas Vargas* show the dynamics of motherhood. The mothers in the stories go through a path of suffering. The paper is an attempt to explore in the stories, how mothers lose their selves in order to create a better future for their children, how in the name of tradition and custom, the hispanic women were oppressed. Most of the women protagonists of Allende are bold, practical, inspiring and intelligent. These characteristic traits suit the three mothers under study. The paper also studies the survival skills and the utilitarian thinking of Allende's women protagonists.

Keywords: Motherhood, identity, oppression, survival skills, Isabel Allende, Eva Luna

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is glorified as the best part of womanhood. In the society it is idolized and considered as a position everyone looks up to but do all the mothers get proper respect for all their deeds and actions? The answer is no. In earlier days women were considered just for their ability to procreate. Later, after the wake of women's rights movements and feminist consciousness, the position of women improved in the society. But the same woman once becomes a mother, she loses herself for the family especially her children. She becomes a family-oriented being, the patriarchal

society has created such a picture in the minds of people. The society hails the pains of motherhood which motivates the women to accept her suffering as blessing. Then if you ask whether motherhood is a bane, then the answer will be no. Indeed it is a blessing and pinnacle of womanhood, if the mothers are given proper rights and respect equal to man. The society should help mother to live her life without losing her identity. Most of the women accept all the challenges for the sake of love for their children. And literature has never failed to reflect the dynamics of motherhood. It has portrayed some unforgettable mothers like Hawthorne's Hester Pyrenne, Louisa May Alcott's Mrs. Margaret March,

Jane Austen's Mrs. Bennet, Dickens' Lady Dedlock and Stephen King's Margaret White and many others.

Isabel Allende, the Chilean American writer is from a Hispanic patriarchal society. She is known for her style of magical realism. She has written more than twenty four books including fiction, memoirs and plays. In almost all her works, the women characters are portrayed stronger and wiser than their male counterparts. As a feminist, most of her works represent the women who can be taken as role models. The women protagonists of Allende never fail to inspire in spite of their struggle and suffering. She also records the sensual side of women. Her book *The Stories of Eva Luna* (1989) is a collection of 23 tales which has myriad of characters from different walks of life. The stories are narrated by the eponymous heroine Eva Luna to her lover Rolf Carle. Eva employs the age old tradition of Scheherazade, and narrates a series of twenty three tales to entertain her lover. Three stories in the collection, "Clarissa", "The Judge's Wife" and "The Gold of Tomas Vargas" are selected for the study. These stories portray the mother in different shades of light. Their self-sacrifice, the way they handle their struggles, the way they maintain their social image, their mental courage and their utilitarian thinking in the times of adversity make them unique heroines of Allende. Studying these characters will pave way for us to understand the dynamics of motherhood, Hispanic patriarchal society and Isabel Allende's character construction skills.

#### THE PLOT AND DISCUSSION:

I

Clarisa is about Eva's account of a pious catholic woman who lived in the early part of twentieth century. She had a saint like image in the society. Clarisa was free of desire for materialistic things. She gave everything she had to the poor and needy retaining just clothes and money enough for food. An old house in which she lived was inherited from her parents. Though she is from an aristocratic family her life after marrying a self-centered judge changed for the worse. Clarisa gave birth to a daughter and a son. But both of them were mentally retarded. Her husband couldn't accept his

unfortunate fate, so in frustration and shame, he locked up himself in the patio of the house for more than forty years. He would open the door to Clarisa only to handover the chamber pot and to get the food from her. Her husband stopped supporting the family financially and morally. But nothing could disturb the serene and optimistic mind of Clarisa. She didn't see her retarded children as a curse or a burden rather she considered them as pure because they are free of thinking or doing evil. Her only concern was to protect them from sufferings of the world especially after her death because she knew that there is no one to take care of them after she is gone.

Her husband has abandoned all his responsibilities and started living his life on his own terms. He started having sexual relationship with other women too. So the whole responsibility of taking care for the children fell on the hands of Clarisa. She started doing almost all the small works like sewing rag dolls, baking wedding cakes etc. that came in her way to provide for her children. She brought up the children as if she was a single parent though their father was living in the backside of their house. Her optimism and peace of mind in the times of trouble is something noteworthy. Once when a robber tried to rob her, she treated him like her son, her loving nature and her melting words softened the heart of the robber, he went away with a kiss on Clarisa's cheek. She is not only popular among common people but also dealt with big hands in the city like bankers, businessmen and politicians. She influenced a Congressman named Diego Cienfuegos to support the Teresian sisters whom he considered as ideological opposites. From then there begun a good friendship between Clarisa and Diego.

Later when she became pregnant with her third child, midwife suggested that even this child will be a retarded one just like her previous children. But Clarisa argued that

God maintains a certain equilibrium in the universe, and just as He creates some things twisted, He creates others straight; for every virtue there is a sin, for every joy an affliction, for every evil a good..... (Allende, 33-34).

Then, she gave birth to a strong and healthy son. After few years, another son was also born who was as healthier as the previous child. Now Clarisa told that her two stronger sons would help her to take care of the retarded children. She brought up all the four children through doing a lot of jobs. She never asked anyone for financial support.

Only in the climax of the story, through Clarisa's conversation with Eva, we come to know that the father of the two stronger sons were not her own husband but its Don Diego. Clarisa doesn't consider it as a sin but as a boost to balance the scales of destiny. Now two stronger brothers would care for their disabled siblings.

In hispanic culture, women were supposed to follow *marianismo* tradition in which they were supposed to have sex with husband, only as a conjugal duty and in order to produce children. They should be chaste and spiritually stronger than men. They should be saintly. They should not do anything that gives happiness or pleasure to themselves. They should put their family's needs first. They should be always subservient to men. The equivalent aspect for men is called *Machismo* which means "a sense of masculine pride". Their duty is to protect and provide for the family. A study says that hispanic women suffer psychologically because of this self silencing custom which results in the depression. Suppressing all their desires makes them mentally ill.(Kosmicki, 2017) But Allende's women are an exception, they didn't allow their problems to affect their mental abilities, rather they act practically and overcome their challenges.

Clarisa exhibits the characteristics of nineteenth century Hispanic catholic woman, she maintains her saintly image in the society. Though there is no comfort or support from her husband, she provides him food and clears his chamber pot as a wife's duty. Even after knowing about his fornication she does not go away from him. She bears everything patiently. She had a good friendship with Don Diego. She would have led a better life with Don Diego but she doesn't do it openly because she doesn't want to put a stain on her social image. Rather she begets two sons through him. Though, she says that she did this to

balance the destiny, we can understand that there was complete love between Diego and Clarisa. When she foresees her death, she spreads the news and many people come to visit her but when Diego comes, the weather of the room changes completely. They both have a personal conversation for twenty minutes, after that Diego goes teary eyed but with a smile. On the other hand Clarisa, weeps with certain happiness. Though there was love between them, they couldn't live together. She doesn't break the stereotype, but she uses her freedom of sex in a utilitarian way. Her act of producing children out of wedlock seemed a better thing to bring happiness to her family and herself.

## II

The Judge's wife is the next story in which the mother takes an extreme step to protect her children. Judge Hidalgo is known for his severity in exercising his duties and carrying out the laws without any benignity. His wife Casilda was many years younger to him but after marrying her, there was a positive change in the life of Hidalgo. The whole town noticed his change and praised Casilda for her influence. They had three children. Another important character is Nicolas Vidal, the most wanted criminal, who is considered to be the reason for many acts of violence in the city. On seeing him at his birth, the midwife prophesized that "*a woman will cost him his life*" (Allende,148). So from his young age, he avoided women in his life. With woman, his life would have been better but because of the fatal omen, he never allowed anyone to enter his life. He doesn't know who his father is and he was not very close to his mother too. So from a young age, his mind went on fights, power and violence. He became the leader of a gang of outlaws when he turned just twenty years of age.

People were afraid to meddle with him and his gang. But Judge Hidalgo never left his efforts to catch this man who never obeyed law or justice. So Judge planned for an emotional trap using his mother to catch Nicolas Vidal. He put his mother in a cage and placed it in the Center of governmental buildings with just a jug of water. Knowing that as a trap, Vidal didn't come to save his mom. After two days, Vidal's mother became very sick. Judge

refused to the requests of city leaders to release her, so they approached his wife Casilda. On hearing this incident, she took a basket of food and water and went to see the woman with all of her children. When the Judge came near her, they exchanged a sorrowful glance, and he took the food and gave it to his prisoner.

Vidal was happy because both his and his mother's lives were spared. But the next day his mother hanged herself not because of the humiliation but because of the abandonment by her son. This triggered Vidal, so he planned to kill the Judge before dawn. The news of the revenge bent Vidal and his gang reached the Judge's family when they were travelling to a spa on the coast. He informed the Police to come, but before they come, Vidal might come to the place so he started to meet the police in half way. Judge drew the car very fastly, in order to save all their lives, but the tension made that old man's heart to fail. He died on the way and when the car came to a stop, Casilda checked for any human trace but couldn't find any, so she decided to do the extreme to save the children. She found a small cave and left her three children there after checking whether it is a safe place. She instructed them not to move out of the place until police comes and not to shout even if they hear her scream. She went to the road and waited for Vidal's gang in neat and pleasing attire. She found becoming a prey to those men is the only way to save her children. So she decided to entertain them sexually until police comes. She prayed that there should be more men, so that she can steal more of their time. She calculated how long it will take for her to die. Her only motive was to save her children from the cruel hands of Vidal and his gang.

She waited for a big band of outlaws but all who came was just Nicolas Vidal. He came alone to kill his enemy. When he realized that the Judge is no more, his evil plans turned towards Casilda. He wanted to kill her but on seeing her alone; he put away his gun and fell in the trap of Judge's wife. She used all the seductive tricks to steal more of the time. For Nicolas Vidal who avoided women from the beginning it was such an ecstasy. He enjoyed every move of Casilda. Though she started this game as a way to save her children, at some point she too

enjoyed it and realized her sensuality for the first time in life. Her husband was an old man and he never appreciated her body or pleased her unlike Vidal. And they never had such ecstatic affair. At this moment, she heard the sound of the troops and pleaded Vidal to go away and escape from the army but he chose to stay near her till his last breath. He gave his last kiss to her and stayed there holding her in arms. He was arrested and assassinated. Thus, the prophesy of the midwife was fulfilled.

Casilda's life revolves around her children. She was ready to sacrifice her live and her body for the sake of her children. The courage, self-sacrifice and the presence of mind in the times of trouble adds to the strength of her character. Another mother in the story is Juana la triste , Nicolas Vidal's mother. She could withstand the humiliation of the Judge but couldn't tolerate the abandonment of her son. Though there was not a good relationship between her and Vidal. She felt ashamed when she learnt that she was not considered even by her own son. Her suicide shows that the lives of mothers were centered on their children and their relationship with their off springs added to their honour in that Latin American society.

### III

The next story is "The Gold of Tomas Vargas". The eponymous anti-hero of the story is Tomas Vargas who is known for his miserliness and womanizing. Antonia Sierra is his wife and they had six children. But he never took care of them. He was not ready even to pay for their clothing, food and education though he had enough money. He buried his gold nuggets in a very safe place. It was Antonia who took care of the children. Her husband used to drink and beat her, her body was really ravaged by work, birth of her children and the number of miscarriages. But nothing stopped her from working for her children; she did quite a lot of small works like cooking for the police, washing vessels and cleaning the school to earn the bread. But she never complained about her plight to anyone or she never portrayed herself pitiable. A young girl named Concha Diaz came to her house with a popped belly. She told that she was pregnant with Tomas Vargas' child. Though Tomas denied the fact, he brought her

home because everyone knew that he is a womanizer. Antonia was ashamed even to go out to work with dignity as before. Initially she hated Concha but later she understood that was the mistake of her husband. Seeing Concha's suffering, her heart softened towards her, she helped her throughout pregnancy. She started to treat her like a daughter. Even Concha helped her with small household chores. When it was time for delivery, Antonia stayed with her day and night until the baby was born. Two weeks after delivery, Tomas tried to coax Concha to sleep with him. He didn't mind the body condition of her, she had an unhealed scar. When Antonia saw him forcing Concha, she stepped towards him with strength that she had never shown anyone. With anger in her eyes and ferocity in her walk she moved towards him when he made a slight gesture to thrash her. This was the first time that Antonia showed her opposition in a strong way. This surprised Tomas, when he turned towards Concha, he saw her standing with a heavy clay pot to break on his head. He understood the seriousness of the situation, thus he left without torturing them.

When he no longer could exert his manly power towards Antonia or Concha, he turned towards gambling. Once he lost his bet to a Lieutenant, he was asked to pay the gambling debt of thousand pesos. He was beaten up severely when he told that his buried gold was stolen and hence he can't pay the debt. And a week later, he went alone to the tavern, where he has buried his treasure. He did not return home and two days later he was found murdered with a machete with his gold near him. The society believed that he was murdered for the gambling debt but the truth remains a mystery. The only revelation author gives is the gold came to the hands of Antonia and Concha. No one was ready to investigate the case and no one was curious to know the murderer. No one grieved for his death. The two women took the gold and used it for the welfare of their children. They lived happily with all their children. Together they started cookery business and their lives changed for the better.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In all the three stories, the mother lives her life just for the sake of her children. She is patient,

compassionate and self-sacrificing. The mother handles all the challenging tasks in order to provide a better life for her children. These stories depict the lives of early twentieth century mothers from hispanic patriarchal society. There is a touch of irony in the characters of these mothers, i.e Clarisa who is considered as a saint begets children out of wedlock, Antonia is happy about the murder of her husband, Casilda's defense plan ends to be an act of pleasure. Though there are flaws in these mothers, Allende makes the readers feel sympathetic towards them and celebrate their happiness.

Clarisa had a great love for music and learnt to play piano when she was young but she couldn't buy Piano or enrich her musical knowledge for nearly sixty years of her life. When she was presented a piano by her friends at her old age,

she sat down on the piano stool and played, by memory and without hesitation, a Chopin nocturne.(Allende, 30).

She didn't have time to pursue her interest. Mothers lose themselves step by step for their families. Both Clarisa and Antonia serve as the breadwinner in addition to taking care of children and doing household chores. In spite of their unhappy marriages to their husbands, they stick onto them for social reasons. They consider it as a wife's duty to serve their husbands. They looked older for their age because of the burden they carried on their shoulders. Both the mothers can be considered as single mothers even though they didn't separate from their husbands. The father characters in the stories are not fit to be the fathers. They are impulsive, imprudent and unwise. Antonia tolerated all the ill treatment done to her but when she found the daughter like Concha was going to be ill treated, she started her combat with her husband. Both Antonia and Clarisa extend their motherly affection towards Concha and the robber respectively though they are not born out of them. It is true that a woman becomes more matured and compassionate when she becomes a mother.

Another important characteristic feature of Allende's heroines in the stories is their utilitarian thinking. Utilitarianism is a moral theory which focuses on the consequence. It states that any action

that promotes happiness or pleasure to a number of people is a right thing even if it is not in the societal rule book. *Utilitarianism is a theory of morality, which advocates actions that foster happiness or pleasure and opposes actions that cause unhappiness or harm* ("Utilitarianism defined"). Clarisa who is considered as a saint by her people, doesn't consider her begetting sons through Don Diego as a sin. She says Eva,

"That wasn't a sin, child, just a little boost to help God balance the scales of destiny. You see how well it worked out, because my two weak children had two strong brothers to look after them". (Allende,40)

Casilda, the Judge's wife on the other hand goes to the extreme of losing her body and life to protect her children. When she learns that the situation is hopeless at the middle of a night with no people around, she plans quickly to entertain the enemies. She doesn't do it out of lust but as a defense action. Though it is a morally wrong thing, she sees it as a way to free her children from the hands of her enemies. She executes the plan and succeeds in it. Allende never misses to portray the sensual side of her women. The heroines take their freedom of sex in hand for personal and familial benefit. Mothers are always expected to hide their emotions and bury their desires for the sake of the families. But the father figures in the stories live their lives as they wish. Their irresponsibility adds burden to their wives. In the story of Tomas Vargas, the two women after the death of Tomas invest the money wisely in the cookery business and come out of their poverty stricken life. Feminine resilience of these characters is remarkable.

A study says that single mothers face more problems socially, psychologically, emotionally and economically than the mothers who live with their spouses.(Kotwal and Prabhakar, 2017). The mother characters in the stories overcome all these challenges but they have suffered a lot in their journey of life. They have lost themselves while creating a better life for their children. No one is bothered about the likes and dislikes, dreams and desires of the mothers.

These three protagonists of Allende didn't break the stereotype openly but they had the ideas of freedom embedded within them. With thoughts of equality and liberation in their minds they can be seen as the precursors of modern woman. They cleverly maintained their social image but Allende helps us to explore the inner depths of these mothers. Though their actions were the benefit of their children, they found certain things which made them happy. Clarisa found happiness in begetting sons through the man she loved; Antonia found her happiness in the death of Tomas Vargas and Casilda found her own sensuality only after the death of her husband. Allende breaks the marianismo tradition in this way.

In this twenty first century, though the situation of women has changed for the better, even now the mothers suffer due to issues like, gender inequality, identity crisis, lack of economic independence, inability to balance household chores and job pressure, single parenting etc. The mothers undergo depression due to the motherhood goals set by the society. Most of the media exhibit the ideal mothers but in real life the goals are unreachable for them. The so called mommy myth should be broken (Doughlas and Michaels; 2004).When many women can excel despite of all these issues, they can reach greater heights if they are supported by their husbands and families. The very first step to empower the society is empowering women, especially mothers. Society should start celebrating the dreams of mothers just like they celebrate the duties of motherhood.

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