

The Schema of Cultural Power in The House of the Spirits from the Perspective of New Historicism

Yiting Ren

Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China

Abstract

The House of the Spirits, by tracing the rise and fall of three generations of a family, mirrors the trajectory of modern Chilean history, achieving a profound integration of individual narrative and national history. On the dimension of cultural power, the novel, through the modes of power operation employed by conservative forces such as the landowner Esteban, reveals how ideology perpetuates the reproduction of power structures. At the level of body politics, it uncovers the internal logic of historical narrative: how macro-political struggles are translated into the oppression, trauma, and resistance inscribed on women's bodies, demonstrating that history is co-authored by physical suffering and the will to survive. Ultimately, the novel becomes a vehicle for cultural negotiation. Through the literary reconstruction of obscured memories, it achieves the renewal and reshaping of historical meaning in the process of its dissemination.

Keywords

New Historicism; *The House of the Spirits*; Cultural Power; Body Politics; Cultural Negotiation.

1. Introduction

The House of the Spirits, the representative work of Isabel Allende, chronicles the modern historical transformations of Chile through the form of a family saga. Tracing the fate of three generations of the Trueba's family, the novel enshrines individual experience and collective memory within the national political structure, constructing a symbolic space charged with historical trauma. By intertwining private emotions with public processes-from colonial legacies to dictatorial rule-the work establishes a powerful intertextuality. It not only reveals the operations of power and the politics of memory but also illuminates the cultural function of literature in writing history and constructing identity.

2. The Deconstruction of Historical Narrative from the Perspective of New Historicism

The "truth" presented by traditional grand narratives is characterized by teleology and formulism, whereas Stephen Greenblatt's concept of "touching the real" seeks to break through singular narratives and explore people's daily lives and their ways of thinking about the world in history[1]. Starting from the reality of Chile, Isabel Allende constructs a narrative structure in *The House of the Spirits* that maps family history onto national history, thereby practicing the observational approach of New Historicism.

Esteban Trueba epitomizes the inherent paradox within the Latin American modernization process. He establishes Tres Marias and pursues a fervent developmentalism- "A fever of activity commenced... Anxious to rescue in the course of a few months what had lain in ruins for years[2]". This represents a form of temporal violence that compresses social evolution. However, his modernization practices are built upon a foundation of feudalistic personal

control, creating a profound contradiction between technological modernity and social pre-modernity. He believes that "You have to use a strong hand on these poor devils-that's the only language they understand"[2]; his authoritarian rule reveals the coexistence of economic progress and political despotism characteristic of Latin America's conservative modernization model. Ultimately, the order he strives so hard to maintain is devoured by even more extreme violence, making him a victim of his own logic.

Clara, with her clairvoyant abilities, poses a challenge to the linear view of history. Her "little notebook" records what official history neglects, noting "recording the events of those years...and I can now use them to reclaim her memory"[2], thereby becoming a vessel for the history of emotions and the body. In response to her husband's violence, she responds with silence. "Clara still said nothing... he ignored her silence and spoke normally to her, interpreting her slightest gestures as replies" [2]. In doing so, she constructs a space of spiritual autonomy that power cannot fully penetrate, practicing a form of non-violent, everyday resistance.

Blanca directly challenges class barriers through her body and emotions. Her love affair with the peasant's grandson, Pedro Tercero Garcia, is condemned as behavior "raised Blanca without morals... ..without a sense of her own class" [2]. Yet, in the most fundamental way, this relationship exposes the artificiality of the hierarchical order. Alba, as the third generation, personally endures the full weight of violence stemming from historical contradictions. She deeply realizes that "memory is fragile and the space of a single life is brief... it may also be true that everything happens simultaneously" [2]. Her act of writing aims to blend fragmented memories, attempting to forge a narrative community on the foundation of trauma, one capable of embracing contradictions.

In *The House of the Spirits*, Esteban represents the construction and predicament of authoritarianism; Clara embodies spiritual cognition and non-verbal resistance; Blanca reveals the political nature of emotion and the body; and Alba shoulders the task of narrative integration after trauma. Together, these four characters constitute a complete spectrum of subjective practices within power structures. The trajectory of the three family generations runs parallel to and mirrors the historical process of Chile, from the establishment of the oligarchic state and the intensification of social reform to violent trauma and the reconstruction of memory. This mirror-like structure between family saga and national history is precisely the literary practice through which New Historicism uses "the many narratives of histories" to supplement and interrogate "the national history". Alba's act of writing itself becomes a conscious reflection on the mode of historical narration.

3. The Theatrical Presentation of Cultural Power and Subversive Strategies

Power exists not only within institutionalized domains such as courts and churches but also "pervasively within the meaning systems of ideology, specific modes of representation, and repeatedly employed narrative structures"[3]. As aesthetic discourse, literature inevitably becomes a site of the operation and contestation of power[4]. In *The House of the Spirits*, the system established by Esteban Trueba at Tres Marias constitutes a micro-kingdom where authority is consolidated through micro-cultural practices, while the actions of Clara and Blanca reveal the potential for resistance within the power structure.

Esteban's techniques of domination exemplify the permeation of Foucault's disciplinary power. His daily dawn ride across the estate- "He woke at dawn... He did not return until sundown" [2], constitutes a form of mobile panoptic surveillance, implanting a mechanism of self-monitoring in the hearts of the tenants through continuous observation. In terms of economic control, the system of vouchers become "a substitute for legal tender" [2], constructing a closed universe of debt that, while usurping monetary sovereignty, firmly locks the tenants into structural

dependency. Regarding education, he establishes schools but strictly limits the scope of knowledge: "he was not in favor of their acquiring any additional learning, for fear they would fill their minds with ideas unsuited to their station and condition" [2], aiming to instrumentalize education as a tool for consolidating class rule and preventing the awakening of consciousness. However, the novel also meticulously reveals the subversive forces within the power structure. Clara's clairvoyant abilities constitute a distinct system of knowledge production. The salons she hosts bring together various marginalized scholars and mystics to hold "urgent consultations with the spirits of the three-legged table" [2], thereby forming a female-centered cultural space blending heterogeneous knowledge, which challenges the dominant intellectual order. Her prolonged silence towards her husband, interpreted by Esteban as "interpreting her slightest gestures as replies" [2], is, in fact, a form of non-violent resistance that refuses the request for discourse and constructs a realm of spiritual autonomy.

Blanca's resistance is more "material" and strategic. She achieves a symbolic traversal of class boundaries by exchanging old clothes and "tiptoed out so as not to wake the rest of the family" [2] to meet her lover, a tenant's son-a practice of "micro-resistance" in daily life. She also transforms her private emotional network into a channel for political enlightenment, facilitating meetings between her lover and her brother where "they talked of justice, of equality, of the peasant movement and of Socialism", [2]. Furthermore, even after being forced into an arranged marriage, she still has "any hope of ever seeing him again" [2], effectively nullifying the superficial marital relationship and executing a subtle strategy of "formal compliance, substantive resistance".

The relationship between power and resistance possesses ambiguous and dialectical characteristics. Power exhibits a certain resilience, as seen in Esteban eventually becoming "accustomed" to Clara's silence, and the estate system tolerating limited complaints to release pressure. Subversive practices also have their limitations: Clara's spiritual community remains perpetually marginalized and Blanca's love story ends tragically. These localized forms of resistance, concerned with survival, reflect the immense difficulty of achieving complete liberation within a dense network of power.

Through these depictions, *The House of the Spirits* demonstrates that genuine power permeates the micro-practices that define knowledge and discipline bodies, while effective resistance can also be embedded in silence, writing, and acts of everyday transgression. Literature not only records this pervasive cultural struggle but also, through its aesthetic form, analyzes the trajectories of power, reconstructs reality by resisting the given with the power of imagination, and affirms the enduring potential of subjects to pursue freedom and dignity within historical constraints.

4. The Politics of Body, Violence, and Resistance

The disciplining of female bodies by male hegemony has been a long process. [5]As Michel Foucault's concept of the "microphysics of power" posits, micro-power continuously acts upon individuals through their bodies, achieving the purpose of discipline and control. Male power traverses the female body, with their bodies objectified to satisfy male desires. The direct consequence of such discipline is that women are deprived of the right to govern their own bodies. Their bodies are often dominated by paternal or marital authority, reduced to commodities within a patriarchal society[6]. *The House of the Spirits* presents multiple layers of violence, ranging from the individual to the state, alongside the embodied poetics of resistance developed by women in response.

Esteban's violence embodies the primal template of power operation. His assaults on peasant girls intertwine class, gender, and racial oppression. His mentality- "It seemed that no sooner did he roll in the pasture with a girl than she became pregnant." [2]-essentially treats the female

body as conquerable land, depriving it of bodily and reproductive autonomy. State violence represents a systematic upgrade of this template: Jaime Trueba-soldiers “tied their hands and feet with barbed wire... threw them on their faces in the stalls... rotting in their own excrement” [2]; Alba and others suffer systematic rape and torture designed to destroy dignity and materialize the body as a medium for political intimidation. Both share the same origin: Esteban's violence is the capitalistic mode of control, while state violence is its industrialized form of annihilation. The novel thus reveals that the seeds of systemic violence were long embedded in everyday patriarchal and class oppression.

Confronting multi-layered discipline, the women in the novel develop a resilient embodied poetics of resistance. Alba, in prison, records “the small events of the women's section of the jail” [2]. This act of writing, grounded in bodily pain, constitutes an ethically authoritative “body archive” in a context where official history seeks to erase traces. Collectively, the female prisoners support each other through song: “Each time they passed, Ana and Alba sang with the strength of their despair.. the prisoners would stand up tall, straighten their backs” [2]. This prison singing as a form of cultural resistance, through an embodied collective ritual, rebuilds connections severed by violence. Alba's writing and the collective singing together delineate the dual dimensions of an “embodied poetics of resistance”: writing deepens inwardly, transforming trauma into historical narrative; singing resonates outwardly, constructing an emotional community in the immediate present.

This narrative constructs a theoretical framework of embodied resistance. First, it rebuilds the vulnerability of the body as a political and ethical resource, a last line of defense against objectifying violence. Second, through the concrete practices of its characters-Clara's spiritual silence, Blanca's reverse psychology, Alba's traumatic writing-it demonstrates the embodied nature and diverse strategies of resistance. Their common trajectory is a shift from being disciplined objects to becoming subjects capable of self-narration. Ultimately, literary narrative itself becomes a symbolic medium for bodily experience and a political field of memory; when the body is conscripted by violence, narrative becomes the continuation of its existence and resistance.

Thus, when grand narratives fail, bodily sensation and memory constitute a more authentic historical foundation. When public discourse is suppressed, the body's survival, the recording of pain, and the narrativization of private experience become the most fundamental form of political defiance. The hope engendered here is a somber one, rooted in the resilience of life-a hope that, in the face of annihilation, persists in speaking, remembering, and connecting.

5. Narrative as a Site of Cultural Negotiation and the Reshaping of Meaning

Lyotard, a representative figure of postmodernism, argues that “the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a narrative of speculation or a narrative of emancipation”[7]. From a postmodern perspective, history is viewed as a “work created by the narrator”, a text fashioned according to the needs of a particular moment[8]. Based on this understanding of history, *The House of the Spirits* deconstructs and retells Chilean history, employing cultural negotiation at the narrative level to explore the possibilities of carrying memory and producing meaning after the collapse of metanarratives.

First, the novel engages in historical negotiation through metaphorical rewriting. It represents the coup and the subsequent repression as an “earthquake” and a “long winter”. This strategy both evades censorship and compels readers to actively decode the narrative. When macro-level naming is suspended, bodily experiences-such as the meticulous details of torture recorded by Alba-construct a micro-level chain of evidence with precision, achieving an effect

of “representing reality through the imaginary”. Furthermore, the characters in the book embody different systems of historical cognition: Esteban trusts legal documents, Clara relies on intuition and emotional notes, and Alba, as the compiler, synthesizes both, attempting an ethical synthesis of meaning across the fractures of trauma.

Second, the novel selectively inherits and transforms cultural traditions. Catholic rituals retain their outer form while being infused with heterogeneous elements like spiritism. Simultaneously, “chivalry” is systematically feminized: Clara's silent steadfastness, Blanca's transgression for love, and Alba's testimony in prison-these women assume the traditional duties of knights, rewriting the gender script of national narrative. Magical elements are transformed into a historical epistemology: ghosts become the symbolic return of trauma, and prophecies capture the structure of violence.

This kind of negotiation reshapes narrative meaning. The family saga becomes an alternative container for grand history, enabling political history to achieve a “soft landing” through family emotions. The Bildungsroman model is also transformed: Alba matures by enduring violence and narrating collective trauma, marking a paradigm shift from “individual growth” to “national trauma cognition.” This narrative strategy ultimately forms a mechanism of literary therapy, forcing opposing discourses into the same fictional framework through textual coercion to achieve social synthesis. When official archives are tampered with or destroyed, the novel transforms into a storage medium for counter-memory. The temporal gap between the novel's publication and the historical events it depicts, along with its subsequent interpretations, constitutes an open field for the negotiation of meaning, metaphorically illustrating the logic of historical meaning-making under postmodern conditions-truth emerges in the process of continuous telling.

Therefore, the cultural negotiation in *The House of the Spirits* is a highly self-conscious literary practice. By rewriting history and mixing traditions, it demonstrates how literature can carry memory and deal with differences. Alba's act of writing at the novel's end- “I began to write with the help of my grandfather...” [2]-symbolizes the promise of narrative: history requires us to create a way of speaking about it through our continuous telling.

6. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed *The House of the Spirits* from the perspective of New Historicism, revealing its literary value across three dimensions: first, literature is an active participant in history. Through spectral poetics, body politics, and polyphonic structure, the novel constructs a memorial universe parallel to official discourse, actively engaging in the contestation of historical meaning. Second, literature serves as an imaginary laboratory for social reconstruction. Through cultural blending, gender role reversal, and genre transformation, the work experiments with the ethical possibilities of coexistence and dialogue amidst fragmentation. Third, literature functions as a sustained field of meaning negotiation. Its open structure compels readers to establish ethical connections with heterogeneous memories, transforming history into a process of continuous renegotiation within narrative.

The House of the Spirits vividly exemplifies the core tenet of New Historicism: history is a dynamic process continuously constructed through narrative. Literature maintains openness where power seeks to end dialogue, preserves memory where violence attempts to erase traces, and carves out spaces for negotiation where division solidifies opposition. The vow pronounced by Allende through Alba's pen- “I am going to write this history”-becomes literature's solemn commitment in the face of historical trauma: to speak in the midst of silence, to guard against forgetting, and to doubt within certainty. This ultimately manifests literature's irreplaceable mission: to open for us a space-ethical and poetic-where we can breathe, think, and imagine alternative possibilities when reality itself becomes suffocating.

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