

The Rebirth of Chile in Relation to Childbirth and Female Pain

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Abstract

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Chilean novelists Isabel Allende and Diamela Eltit wrote during a time in which Augusto's Pinochet's reign created chaos within the government and suffering for its citizens. In the works *The House of the Spirits* by Allende and *The Fourth World* by Eltit, emphasis is placed on the female characters' inability to have full freedom of speech, and also how the burdens of conceiving a child and giving birth became not just an infliction upon their bodies, but upon their existence as women in a disadvantaged society. By analyzing the conceptions, pregnancies, and births of various characters in the novels, while referencing how society treated women during Pinochet's dictatorship, this research paper will reveal that childbirth is used as a metaphor for the birth of a new Chile.

Chilean novelists Isabel Allende and Diamela Eltit wrote during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, which influenced them to focus on the chaos within the government and suffering felt by its citizens. In the works *The House of the Spirits* by Allende and *The Fourth World* by Eltit, emphasis is placed on childbirth and the pain inflicted upon women. More specifically, the authors hone in on the circumstances of the children's conceptions, the mother's pregnancies, and their experiences while giving birth. By analyzing these two novels in regards to the political situation during Pinochet's regime and the female roles in society, this research paper will reveal that childbirth is used as a metaphor for the birth of a new Chile.

The House of the Spirits is a novel originally written in Spanish by Allende in 1982. It was received as both a family saga and political testimony, inspired by Allende's experiences living in exile.¹ She wrote the piece after Chile's socialist reform was destroyed by a military coup led by Gen. Augusto Pinochet in 1973. In this coup, Allende's cousin and Chile's president, Salvador Allende, died. The Pinochet regime was marked by repression and brutality, inspiring Isabel Allende to become involved with groups offering aid to victims of the regime. After deeming it unsafe in Chile, she fled the country in 1975 with her husband and two children. They lived in exile in Venezuela for 13 years and in that time she wrote *The House of the Spirits* to her dying grandfather.² Allende uses this novel to establish herself as a powerful female writer in a predominantly male literary world in Latin America, and to make heroines out of the female characters whom are threatened by their societies. In particular, it is through the women's ability to give birth, that one can witness a rebirth of Chile.

¹ Cuthbert, Lauren, ed. "Isabel Allende Biography." *Isabel Allende Official Web Page*. JSTOR. Web. 30 Apr 2013.

² Berson, Misha. "This old "House" opened a lot of doors for Isabel Allende." *Seattle Times*. 01 Jun 2007: n. page. JSTOR. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

In the opening scene, we become aware of the plight of women, as one woman sits through a tormenting church sermon along with her fifteen children. The patriarch of the family, Severo, sits in the mass because as an aspiring politician, attending the mass will give him good publicity. Meanwhile, his wife, Nivea, daydreams about allowing women the right to vote as a politician's wife, while also fearing another pregnancy. Allende describes that the "temperature had risen"³ while the priest yells at a harmless woman saying, "And there's the shameless hussy who prostitutes herself down by the docks!"⁴ The priest's lack of regard towards the identity of the woman is a common example of how women are oppressed in society; their identity is to be a housewife or otherwise to be an object sought out for sex or in this case, something to be gawked at.

One woman who encounters immense physical pain as a consequence of her gender is Pancha Garcia, who is brutally raped and then conceives a child with her rapist. The political circumstances in Chile directly influence the circumstances of the book as the rapist, Esteban Trueba considers the people he tries to urbanize as serfs, and all others as unequal and punishable. The land that he urbanizes, Tres Marias, is controlled by Trueba's brutal patriarchal power, and flourishes under negative circumstances. Likewise, a similar type of landowner, Pinochet, assumes leadership and power over Chile after the overthrow of Salvador Allende. The fictional Esteban Trueba and the non-fictional Augusto Pinochet both condone the torture of civilians, and the rape of women as a means of teaching them to stay where they belong: in the kitchen, the nursery, and the home.⁵ Destruction and vengeance are the legacies left by the patriarch whose most obvious victims are women. It is the solidarity of women through

³ Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits*. 3rd ed. New York: Bantam Books, 1986. 4. Print.

⁴ Ibid, p. 2

⁵ Elena, Maria, Acuña Moenne, and Matthew Webb. "Embodying Memory: Women and the Legacy of the Military Government in Chile." *Feminist Review*. 79 (2005): 150-161. JSTOR. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

childbirth and pain that shows the strongest resistance, as Pinochet's dictatorship begins to fall apart.⁶ Also, the first scene of conception is through a rape, already making the reader uneasy as to how women are treated.

It is important to note that the 1970s coincided with Chile's sexual revolution and the emergence of women who would create social change. According to Marjorie Agosin in "Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras," the true agents of change in Chile were women, and it was through "cynical manipulation of women [that brought] Pinochet to power."⁷ For the first time, however, the subject of sexual violence as a form of torture entered into the public arena and also opened up the issue of manipulated gender roles during the processes of repression. It was women who brought these oppressions to light, and it was the torture that these women suffered which symbolize the violations that plagued female sexuality.

By observing the child conception between Esteban and his wife, Clara, we gain a further insight into the male-dominated society. The child's father, Esteban, has a past that includes violence, especially rape, and after his wedding to Clara, the narrator indicates that "He wanted far more than her body; he wanted control over that undefined and luminous material that lay within her and that escaped him even in those moments when she appeared to be dying of pleasure...he was prepared to do everything in his power to seduce her."⁸ Had Clara known that Esteban was a rapist before, the fact alone would not have been enough for her to stop marrying him. This is because at the time, rape did not have the kind of social stigma that it carries today, so it was more accepted.⁹ Though Esteban may not have raped his wife in this instance, it does

⁶ Shea, Maureen. "A GROWING AWARENESS OF SEXUAL OPPRESSION IN THE NOVELS OF CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS." *Confluencia* . 4.1 (1988): 53-59. JSTOR. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

⁷ Agosin, Marjorie. *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras*. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1989. 30. Print.

⁸ Allende, op. cit., p. 96.

⁹ Elena, Maria, Acuña Moenne, and Matthew Webb. "Embodying Memory: Women and the Legacy of the Military Government in Chile." *Feminist Review*. 79 (2005): 150-161. JSTOR. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

not mean that his actions are any less apprehensible. Furthermore, to say that Clara is merely unknowing to his brutality is false: She is a clairvoyant and sees what other people do not. She accepts his brutal nature, which shows that she is acceptant of the oppressive society. Though the conception of her child is not clearly mentioned, it is assumed that she comes to terms with the role that is given to her in society.

When Clara gives birth to her daughter, Blanca, she displays strength even when a male voice dominates the narration. When Blanca was born, she “proved to be an uglier, hairier child than usual...a monster, and a female one to boot.”¹⁰ Describing a newborn baby as a monster is highly unusual, and the description brings to light the harshness of men’s attitude towards women. Furthermore, it is the father who makes it clear that he does not like the child, as he is the one that “sired a monster” and that fate had played a “cruel joke on him.”¹¹ Despite the child being an epitome of innocence, this description is particularly unfair especially when those descriptions seem to correspond directly to the nature of the father. However, the prospect of having the baby—which the mother finds beautiful—indicates that the child will be able to have an improved lifestyle than that of her mothers. This is accomplished when the girl is given better school lessons, and is taught to be independent; she is taught the ideas that women in Pinochet’s society were steered away from.

Since Blanca is born looking grotesque, it not only defies how babies are traditionally viewed as beautiful at birth, but how woman are favored for their beauty. Through birth alone, the child is already breaking societal standards. The fact that Blanca is denounced from her father from birth introduces us to the beginning of her oppression as a woman.

¹⁰ Allende, *Op. cit.*, p. 101

¹¹ *Ibid.*

As time progresses, Blanca has to give birth to her own daughter, Alba, but has to overcome various obstacles in the process. This is because Esteban detests the man that Blanca falls in love with, and even wants him killed. This places a strain on Blanca's relationship with the boy, Pedro Tercero Garcia, as she struggles to have a forbidden romance with him. When Esteban learns of the couple's romance, he charges at her with a horse and whip, nearly killing her. Clara comes to her defense and attempts to stick up for her daughter's lover saying, "You also slept with unmarried women not of your own class. The only difference is that he did it [Garcia] for love. And so did Blanca."¹² Despite Clara showing so much wisdom and compassion, it is no match for her husband's stubbornness and cruelty in the matter. It is left up to Blanca to think for herself.

In a turn of events, Blanca is forced to marry a man that she does not love while she is pregnant with Pedro's child, affecting her quality of life while being pregnant. Despite loving every moment of her time with Pedro, she cannot stand being with her artificial and strange husband—she never even consummates the marriage with him. Esteban forces her to marry another man and wants her to go on a honeymoon to consummate the relationship, because of the long-held tradition. Furthermore, he wants the public to believe that she had always been a virgin prior to marriage. This is far from the case and Blanca describes her anguish when she says, "In the soporific heat of those months Blanca, protected by the creature that was growing inside her, forgot about the magnitude of her disgrace... [she wanted to drift] far away from the cruelties of life, with her daughter as her sole companion."¹³ Being a woman with no choice in a decision so personal shows how much authority men like Esteban had over a woman's body.

¹² Allende, op. cit., p. 200.

¹³ Allende, op.cit., p. 253.

The birth of Blanca's daughter, Alba, is not described in the book but because of the conditions in which Blanca lives in, she flees from her to be by her mother's side, not to return to him. Blanca's strong-willed traits are passed on to Alba, who holds on to her political beliefs, and then conceives a child through rape during her imprisonment. Though Allende does not provide us with much information as to how Alba felt during her pregnancy and child labor, we can imagine Alba's pain and the hands of hands of her rapist. However, the implications of the birth imply hope for Chile to improve its treatment of women. While in prison, Alba encounters another woman who is similarly tortured. She says that her comrade "Did not give in even when they transferred her to a secret clinic of the political police because one of the beatings caused her to lose the child she was carrying and she begun to hemorrhage."¹⁴ Hearing these stories and encountering similar torture gives Alba grief, but once she is freed from captivity, it is her grandmother, Clara, who teaches her to use writing as a political end; to describe the horrors she faced. Although we first-hand read about horrors faced by women in the novel, we can theorize that Alba's readers will feel empowered after reading about how she survived perils exacerbated by her gender.

It is notable to mention that the meaning of the word "alba" in Spanish means "dawn," because like the time of day that brings light, *The House of the Spirits* ends with a feeling that there will be many new beginnings. One of these beginnings is with the birth of Alba's child. The other beginning is with the evolving mindset of Chile towards its female inhabitants. The plotline of this novel relies on its women, as it chronicles the conceptions of numerous family members, whom are mainly women. However, Alba is the first person who is able to shed light on political atrocities through writing, just as Isabel Allende is herself doing. With the many

¹⁴ Allende, op. cit., p. 412.

beginnings of life and the hope for a new attitude towards women, Allende shows that the new generations provide hope for an improved Chile.

Unlike better-known Chilean authors, such as Isabel Allende, Diamela Eltit (b. 1949) remained in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship. It was during this period that she began her literary career, defying the harsh censorship laws and the restriction on the circulation of books. She published *The Fourth World (El Cuarto Mundo)* in 1988. In a 2005 interview with Eltit in *Feminist Review*, she is asked about how the government glorified motherhood and families as ways to rebuild the nation, while states were destroyed by state oppression. Eltit explains the following:

“...the ‘reality’ of what was happening seriously affected women of the popular classes whose husbands, fathers and brothers were imprisoned and disappeared, or even dismissed at work because of their political affiliation. Official cultures impose two simultaneous discourses onto women: they construct the woman-mother as an absolute, as something ‘natural’, and they also make her disproportionately responsible for bringing up her children. I am interested in unravelling this situation, without necessarily disavowing the strategic importance of the maternal function.”¹⁵

In *The Fourth World*, she uses the maternal function and the literary device of disjointedness to call attention to Chile’s political oppression.

The Fourth World begins in the uterine chamber of two growing twins, shifts to the family home, and then details the birth of a child conceived by incest. The story is written to emphasize sexual differences, and to address male-female relationships in Chilean society

¹⁵ Green, Mary. "Dialogue with Chilean Novelist, Diamela Eltit." *Feminist Review*. 79 (2005): 164-171. JSTOR. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

through the bizarre brother-sister relationship.¹⁶ The theme of conception, birth, and incest permeate all pages of the text, all while challenging the roles of women. Even though the male fetus in the beginning sees his mother as inferior, it is with the birth of his own son that we can witness a purging of sin, and a rebirth of the Chilean nation.¹⁷

In the first few paragraphs of *The Fourth World*, the mother of the twins sets the stage for the rest of the book when she describes her conception of the children as horrific rape at the hands of her husband. One page one, she is stricken by a fever and “her only reaction was to comply, automatically and clumsily...suffering the horrible feminine attack of dread.”¹⁸ While the woman seeks the aid of her husband during a time of illness, she is “possessed”¹⁹ by him and rendered useless. The idea of possession emphasizes how the woman is used as an object, and since her dread is described as a “feminine attack” it also emphasizes her gender. The emphasis is significant because it sets the stage towards the perversion that is evident in the rest of the novel, fueled by Eltit’s attitude towards the Chilean government.

After the first incident of rape, the husband rapes his wife once again, conceiving a second child, leaving her pregnant with twins. Eltit describes how the impregnated woman has many dreams after the rape and after the children are born, she frequently describes her horror as being “feminine.” The idea of horror manifesting through the female body by conception, and finally childbirth, is a preeminent theme that Eltit draws upon.

According to *Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse*, by Susan Stanford Friedman, “Confinement of women, in contrast, alludes to the final stages of pregnancy before delivery into the bonds of maternity, the very job of which has

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ This idea is supported by the Translator’s Forward on page x of *The Fourth World*.

¹⁸ Eltit, Diamela. *The Fourth World*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Print.

¹⁹ Ibid.

suppressed their individuality in patriarchy.”²⁰ This shows that even the woman’s devastating conception of her twin children, her very existence from the birth itself, is confined by society.

The second and final scene of childbirth in *The Fourth World* is when the twins conceive a child. Eltit graphically describes conception of their child as “A strange fertilization...seminal residue trickled out and [she] felt the remainder sting like whiplash.”²¹ The language that Eltit uses in this scene and most situations that involve human contact is also unsettling, as we are disconcerted by the coldness that the twins have in their narration. With the birth of their offspring, the girl explains, “...I open myself up to the pain and neutralize myself. From within this new system, the child and I settle on a somatic agreement” (104).²² Here, the girl is acceptant of the pain that she is receiving, indicating that she *relies* on enduring it in order to survive.

In the book, Eltit displays the importance of having the child through the deconstruction of one word: *sudaca*. Initially, we are not entirely clear what Eltit’s intentions are for using the term “*sudaca*,” except for outside knowledge that the term is a derogatory reference towards Latin American immigrants, underscoring a condition of marginality and poverty. According to Donetta Hines in “Women and Chile: In Transition,” this term is confusing because of the issue of translation, but that it has a particular important significance in establishing gender disparities.²³ While in the first part of the novel the *sudacas* are hoodlum youth who attack Maria Chipia (the male twin) and give him his first scar, on the first page of the second part of the novel, suddenly the family and the unborn baby are also referred to as *sudacas*. The narrator also says of her unborn baby: “I want to create a creature that is terribly and scandalously *sudaca*.”

²⁰ Stanford Friedman, Susan. "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse." *Feminist Studies*. 13.1 (1987): 49-82. JSTOR. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

²¹ Eltit, op. cit., p. 69

²² Eltit, op. cit., 104

²³ Donetta, Hines. "'Woman' and Chile: in Transition." *Letras Femeninas*. 28.2 (2002): 60-76. JSTOR. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

²⁴This shows that the speaker has little regard towards the stigma that the word carries, and wants to change its perception. By the end of the second section of the book, it is clear that by giving birth to a forbidden child, there is pride in hoping to defeat the political power of nation.

The incestuous relationship and birth of the twins' child is, on a political level, a necessary consequence of the isolation and terror in which the family is living in.²⁵ Despite the perversity of the situation, the resistance of the twins to oblige to society's beliefs make the birth of their sudaca child a metaphor for the rebirth for a new political system in Chile. As a marginalized group of people resisting their family and societal norms, the birth of the twins' child marks the deconstruction of long-held beliefs, as well as the disintegration of terror.

In the novels *The Fourth World* and *The House of the Spirits*, Diamela Eltit and Isabel Allende are able to defy stereotypes promoted by Augusto Pinochet's regime by using childbirth and female pain as a primary literary device. Through the complicated, and even perverse, circumstances of the characters, it speaks to the perversity infiltrating Chile. By analyzing the scenes of conception, descriptions of pregnancies, and childbirths, one can observe that each time, the woman and child is able to survive oppression, and defy the odds to represent the rebirth of a new Chile.

²⁴ Eltit, op. cit., p. 74

²⁵ Maloof, Judy. "Alienation, Incest, and Metafictional Discourse in Diamela Eltit's "El cuarto mundo"." *Revista Hispánica Moderna* . 49.1 (1996): 107-120. JSTOR. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

