Exile and the Female Condition in Isabel Allende's *De amor y de sombra*

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Chilean author Isabel Allende's second novel, published in Spain in 1984,[1] confirms the impression made by *La casa de los espíritus* (1982; *The House of the Spirits*) of her skill as a storyteller. This time, however, instead of an epic portrayal of four generations of women, she has chosen a more limited historical perspective focusing on a transforming experience in the life of one young woman. Still, Allende remains true to the moral imperative behind all her writing, which is to bear witness through literature to a time and place in Latin-American history: "All those of us who write and are fortunate enough to be published ought to assume the responsibility for serving the cause of freedom and justice. We have a mission to accomplish in the front lines. In the face of the obscurantism that oppresses various countries on our continent, we must offer words, reason and hope. Literature must be placed at the service of mankind. Ideas are the worst enemy of barbarism."[2] Like *La casa de los espíritus*, *De amor y de sombra* (*Of Love and Shadows*) is a novel set in an unnamed country, which is unmistakably the author's homeland, under the dictatorship of an unnamed general, obviously Augusto Pinochet, in approximately 1978. As much as it is a tale of female self-discovery, it is equally, from beginning to end, a repudiation of military regimes and the mentality that sustains them.

The protagonist Irene Beltrán, a beautiful, vibrant, and sensitive young woman who works as a journalist, could be Allende herself, although the author has said: "Irene Beltrán is the synthesis of three Chilean women, journalists like her who worked at investigating the frightful reality of the dictatorship."[3] Irene's conservative, bourgeois upbringing has sheltered her from the social and political realities of her country, yet she is by nature a free spirit with a humanitarian concern for the poor and the aged. In the course of her work, Irene meets a freelance photographer, Francisco Leal, the son of an exiled Spanish anarchist and his wife. Unknown to Irene, Francisco leads a double life as a clandestine revolutionary, helping to smuggle political dissidents in and out of

[1]Allende's thinly disguised condemnation of Augusto Pinochet's authoritarian government in both *La casa de los espíritos* and *De amor y de sombra* precluded their publication in Chile where arbitrary censorship has been practiced since the overthrow of Salvador Allende, the author's uncle, in 1973. For Isabel Allende's viewpoint on this see her essay "Sobre *La casa de los espíritus*," *Discurso literario* 2 (1984): 67-73.

[2]Isabel Allende, "Sobre *La casa de los espíritus*" 71. All translations, with the exceptions of those taken from the English version of *De amor y de sombra*, are mine.

[3]Michael Moody, "Entrevista con Isabel Allende," *Discurso literario* 4 (1986): 44.

the country. When they go on assignment together to do a story about a fifteen-year-old peasant girl supposedly possessed of miraculous powers, they unexpectedly find themselves involved in a confrontation with the military police and the subsequent disappearance of the peasant girl, Evangelina. Irene's decision that she must solve the mystery surrounding Evangelina's abduction leads her, accompanied by Francisco, to uncover evidence of atrocities committed by the military. By this time, the intrepid pair of amateur investigators has fallen in love, but their discovery of one another is overshadowed by the *sombra* of violence and death around them. When they reveal what they know--implicating the whole government in mass murders--their lives are in danger and they must flee the country. The supporting characters are as vividly portrayed as the two protagonists: from Irene's egotistical mother, Beatriz, whose main concern is keeping her youthful figure, to Digna Ranquileo, mother of the abducted girl, whose practical, common-sense approach to life does not allow her to believe in her child's miraculous powers. As in *La casa de los espíritus*, the focus in this novel is on women, although men are essential characters who do not fit neat stereotypes. Here again, we see Allende's interest in women's methods of coping with eccentric or errant husbands, and it is the women as keepers of the hearth who exert the strongest influence on their children. Motherhood itself is clearly one of Allende's preferred themes, one which has direct bearing on the subject of this paper.

In an epigraph to the novel, Allende explains that its inspiration came to her from a man and a woman who "confided their lives to me, saying: here, write it, or it will be erased by the wind."[4] Whatever the portion of fiction required to shape their story into literature, the religious tenor of these words invokes Allende's feeling of moral obligation to bear witness to a tyranny and uprooting she knew personally. For fifteen months after the 1973 coup, Allende stayed in Chile working as a journalist and actively supporting the opposition to Pinochet's government: "Thanks to my work as a journalist I knew exactly what was happening in my country; I lived it firsthand, and those dead, tortured, widowed and orphaned left indelible imprints on my memory. . . . For those who know and love liberty, it is impossible to adapt to a dictatorship. Many of those around us were taken prisoner, killed, exiled or forced into hiding. The moment had come for me to leave, in spite of the promise I had made one day to live and die in this land."[5] Her decision to leave was motivated by terror rather than politics: "I have lived on the edge of violence, escaping from it with much luck. People near and dear to me have suffered prison, torture, death and exile. I am not an exile in the full sense of the word; I was not expelled from the country nor did I take refuge in an embassy. I left because I couldn't stand the fear. I felt a visceral terror in Chile."[6] After she had moved with her family to

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[4]Isabel Allende, *Of Love and Shadows*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

[5]Isabel Allende, "Sobre *La casa de los espíritus*" 70.

[6]Michael Moody 46.

Caracas, Allende read documents published by the Catholic press in Chile reporting the existence of a mass grave in Lonquén, fifty kilometers from Santiago.[7] It was this atrocity that formed the background for the story of two lovers caught up in the violence of the dictatorship.

In the novel, Irene Beltrán discovers the truth of the mass murders and must flee for her life. Exile is the final stage of a journey--not only in search of a young woman who has disappeared, but also in search of her own true self. The irony behind the punishment of exile--for Irene, but not for Francisco who accompanies her--is the subject of this paper.

As Roberto González Echevarría has pointed out in his recent book, *The Voice of the Masters*, "a correlation between Latin American writing and exile can all too quickly be established."[8] This is not just because Latin-American writers have been political exiles in this century and in the past, or because they have felt exiled from the cosmopolitan culture of Europe, or even because they, as writers, have been treated as exiles in their own societies. Modern philosophical, psychoanalytic, and linguistic theories all make use of the concept of exile, thus proving its universal function as "one of those founding tropes that literature invokes constantly as part of its own constitution."[9] More powerful still is the theme of exile in mythology, from the wanderings of Odysseus to the banishment of Adam and Eve. The longing for reintegration with the homeland or a return to paradise lost are metaphors for the insufficiency of the human in the face of divine power.

When we consider the relationship between exile and the female condition, then we are not surprised to discover, as much feminist criticism has pointed out, that, since the beginning of patriarchal history (the foundations of Western culture), woman has been, by definition, an exile. Simone de Beauvoir has summarized it thus: "History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep women in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other."[10] Western mythology itself was a patriarchal construct; through its portrayal of woman as the ambivalent projection of man's fears and desires, not as her own independent self, mythology translates the message that woman must respect a "natural order of things" or risk responsibility for human chaos and destruction. This gender-specific mythology, particularly in its

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[7]Michael Moody 43.

[8]Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) 126.

[9]R. González Echevarría 127.

[10]Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 159.

Judeo-Christian interpretation, is the foundation upon which a primarily Catholic Latin-American society is built.[11]

From Sor Juana to Rosario Castellanos, Teresa de la Parra to María Luisa Bombal, women writers have acknowledged the injustice of the female condition in Latin America. Deeply ingrained in the Hispanic psyche is the either/or image of woman as virgin or slut, Mary or Eve; in woman's hands is the power to ennoble or dishonor her male protector. Purity is highest virtue, and, as Rosario Castellanos describes it, "Of course it is a symbol of ignorance. A radical and absolute ignorance of everything that is going on in the world."[12] By placing this moral burden on the female, Latin society virtually exiles her from any corrupting influence, and thus from any possibility of sharing public power. The traditional internalization of the social mythology, on woman's part, has made her an unwitting accomplice in her own displacement, a tragedy portrayed in novels by women such as Teresa de la Parra's *Ifigenia*, María Luisa Bombal's *La última niebla* (The Final Mist), Elena Garro's *El recuerdo del porvenir* (Recollection of Things to Come), and Marta Brunet's *María nadie* (Mary Nobody).[13]

The women in *De amor y de sombra* are all, in one way or another, exiles from the male-dominated world that controls their destiny. Because of their gender-determined roles as daughters, mothers, wives, or even housemaids, they are relegated to a domestic space where they are oblivious of or powerless against the ruling male authority. Unlike Clara in *La casa de los espíritus*, these female characters do not escape into a world of imagination, practicing what Marjorie Agosín, in another context, has aptly referred to as "an esthetic of silence," which subverts patriarchal authority by creating an inviolate inner space.[14] The women of *De amor y de sombra* are resourceful and often independent, but unquestioning of the world as it is.

An extreme example of this--the woman who is most resistant to facing reality--is Irene Beltrán's mother, Beatriz Alcántara, the most bourgeois of the female characters in the novel. Deserted by Irene's eccentric and philandering father, whose unorthodox business ventures might have angered the military

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[11]For varied interpretations of this gender-based mythology see, Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961); Sharon Magnarelli, *The Lost Rib: Female Characters in the Spanish-American Novel* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1985); and Carmel Virgillo and Naomi Lindstrom, eds. *Woman as Myth and Metaphor in Latin American Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985).

[12]Rosario Castellanos, "La mujer y su imagen," in *Mujer que sabe latín ...* (Mexico: Sepsetentas, 1973) 13.

[13]On this subject see Gabriela Mora, "Narradoras hispanoamericanas: Vieja y nueva problemática en renovadas elaboraciones," in *Theory and Practice of Feminist Literary Criticism*, eds. G. Mora and Karen S. Van Hooft (Ypsilanti, MI: Bilingual Press, 1982) 156-74.

[14]Marjorie Agosín, "Isabel Allende: *La casa de los espíritus*," *Revista Interamericana de Bibliografía* 30 (1985): 450.

authorities enough to have him "disappeared," Beatriz's dependence on social status makes her incapable of accepting the truth or of sympathizing with other women in a similar plight: "She had become the wife of a *desaparecido*. She had often said that no one disappeared in their country, and that such stories were antipatriotic lies. When she saw the distraught women marching every Thursday in the plaza with portraits of their relatives pinned to their bosoms, she had said they were in the pay of Moscow. She never imagined she would find herself in the same situation as those wives and mothers searching for their loved ones."[15] To survive economically, she and Irene run an old-age home on the first floor of their residence, which Irene justifies, for the benefit of her mother's fragile ego, as a social service—"Now that so many families are leaving the country but can't take their parents and grandparents with them, I think we'd be doing them a favor by looking after them" (41). Beatriz is also a slave to her body, determined to keep her youthful appearance and a part-time younger lover, described as "her secret luxury, the reaffirmation of her self-esteem, the source of her deepest vanity" (165). In Beatriz's characterization we recognize the most self-indulgent kind of Latin-American female, acculturated to conform to an image of femininity within a given social order and unwilling to acknowledge any threat to that order or her own well-being: "The news in the press was soothing; they were living in a fairyland. Rumors of hungry women and children storming bakeries were completely false" (167-68). In Beatriz's case, the exile of her womanhood is compounded by the self-exile of her social vanity.

Francisco Leal's mother, Hilda, is a completely different type of woman, totally devoted to her also eccentric husband with whom she fled into exile after Franco's victory in Spain. Accustomed to a life of hard work and deprivation, Hilda finds solace in mothering her three sons and spending her free time in prayer, much to her atheist husband's dismay. Such is her belief in the power of prayer that she joins a group that meets regularly to concentrate their spiritual energy on the destruction of Satan (that is, the General of the Junta) in their midst: "Her family teased her so unmercifully that Hilda began going to her meetings in tennis shoes and slacks, hiding her prayerbook under her sweater. She told them she was going out to jog in the park, and continued serenely in her laborious task of toppling authority with a rosary" (94). When one of her sons commits suicide after being persecuted by the military authorities for his union activities, Hilda turns again to prayer, "accepting the death of her son as one more trial from fate" (118). In a contemporary setting, Hilda's resignation illustrates the persistent tradition of the church as a refuge for the Hispanic-Catholic woman.

Although Hilda's son, Francisco Leal, joins Irene Beltrán in the risky adventure that leads them to proof of the regime's atrocities, his experience as a secret revolutionary prepares him for what they may encounter. It is Irene, sheltered all her life by her sex and her social class, who awakens to the truth of evil around her (111-12). As the omniscient narrator makes clear, Irene's en-

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[15]Isabel Allende, *Of Love and Shadows* 40. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

counter with the shadows of violence and evil is not forced upon her; she seeks it out after her first experience with death: "Irene concluded that it was not only her natural and professional curiosity that had driven her forward, but something akin to vertigo. She had peered into a bottomless well and had not been able to resist the temptation of the abyss" (121). Like the biblical Eve, whose curiosity impels her to eat of the fruit of knowledge, she loses her innocence and is condemned, with Adam, to exile from paradise.

The catalytic incident that leads Irene to her "fall from innocence" is the peasant girl's kidnapping and murder by the police. The young victim, Evangelina Ranquileo, had recently begun to suffer daily convulsions, which neither medicine, religion, nor folk remedies could cure, and the simultaneous howling of dogs and strange banging on the roof, which no one could explain, brought streams of credulous observers who believed she had miraculous powers. The narrator informs us that Evangelina is really suffering from a suppressed libido, as she is fatally attracted to her older brother and unable to consummate her desires. Stranger still is the revelation that Evangelina was actually a neighbor's daughter, born in the same hospital at the same time, and exchanged by mistake by the doctors. The two peasant-class mothers recognized the mistake but couldn't convince the self-righteous doctors of their error, so, accustomed to docility, they each took the other's baby home, giving them both the same first name. Later, the military police find out about Evangelina's seizures and see her as a threat to public order. This typically overaggressive reaction, which is farcically portrayed in the novel, sets in motion a series of events that leads to her murder.

In the context of the rest of the novel, the story of the two Evangelinas injects a note of hyperbolic unreality that points to its symbolic value; were it not so tragic, it would be absurd. Here is the ultimate exaggeration of female repression or exile: Evangelina Ranquileo not only must deny her sexuality but also her very identity from birth for the sake of maintaining social order. After her brutal murder, the other Evangelina--a soul sister, one might say--commits her life to combatting the immoral military regime. She realizes that their destinies were exchanged only by a quirk of fate and that "the girl who had disappeared was more than a sister: that girl was she herself; it was her life the other girl was living, and it would be her death that Evangelina Ranquileo died" (107). This realization is mirrored by Irene Beltrán's shedding her own innocence and making up her mind to find Evangelina's murderer. The moral symbolism--a female response to the biblical question "Am I my brother's keeper?"--is central to the novel's meaning.[16]

To bear this out, the narrator tells us about one important incident in Irene's adolescence--an experience that would mark her female psyche from an early age. Again, this episode is symbolically exaggerated in comparison to

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[16]The name "Evangelina" has both religious and literary symbolism. The surviving Evangelina represents the belief in salvation and redemption through faith, while the murdered one represents the primeval innocence and martyrdom for the love of others.

the realism of the rest of the novel, and we realize that Allende's equation of absurdity with the female condition is critical to the novel's interpretation. One day Irene comes home from school while her parents are away to find the maid Rosa has given birth prematurely without anyone knowing she was even pregnant. When Irene asks Rosa: "Where did that baby come from?" Rosa, trying to maintain the young girl's innocence, responds: "From up there--it fell through the skylight . . . It fell on its head and died. That's why it's covered with blood" (138-39). Knowing full well where the baby came from but not wanting to offend the beloved servant, Irene accepts the explanation and swears never to tell her parents of the incident. They bury the baby in the garden and plant a forget-me-not on the grave. "From that time on, Rosa and Irene were united by an affectionate complicity, a secret that neither of them mentioned for many years" (139). Here again, as in the case of the poor mothers whose babies are switched in the hospital, two females agree to keep silent and conform to the social order. They adapt and persevere in order to survive, but their adaptation is symbolic of their enslavement.

By making Irene Beltrán's "fall from innocence" the center of her novel, Isabel Allende announces that women must turn silent complicity into outspoken activism. The generation of mothers who shielded their daughters from the truth must give way to a new generation of women who demand the truth and reclaim their share of control over history. Women's condition as exile must end.

It is thus particularly ironic that *De amor y de sombra* concludes with Irene Beltrán's leaving her motherland and going into exile, accompanied by Francisco Leal. Like a latter-day Eve, she is exiled from the garden of "paradise" for having tasted the fruit of knowledge. But that paradise was really a prison for women enslaved by social conditioning; now it has become a hell for male and female alike, its shadows populated by tyrants who rule by intimidation and violence. As in the case of Alba and Miguel in *La casa de los espíritus*, Isabel Allende suggests that it may take the solidarity of women, along with the love of liberated men, to eradicate the serpent of *macho*, militaristic evil and reclaim--in a new gender-equal society--the possibility of paradise.