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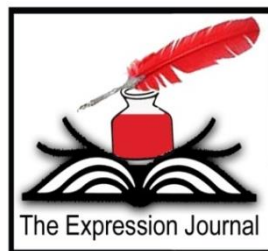
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Testimonio: A Therapeutic Catharsis for Isabel Allende in

The House of the Spirits

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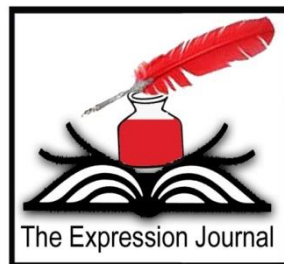
Abstract

The article explores the concept of 'Testimonio'—a genre in English literature that retells historical events using literary elements like dialogue, poetry, and metaphors, often from an eyewitness perspective. Originating in Latin America, Testimonio emerged as a response to social and political upheavals, such as the Cuban Revolution and dictatorial regimes in countries like Chile and Argentina. It serves as a medium for marginalized voices, challenging official histories and exposing human rights violations. The article focuses on Isabel Allende's novel *The House of the Spirits* as an example of Testimonio. The novel spans three generations of Chilean history, addressing themes of dictatorship, repression, and alternative histories. Allende wrote the book in exile, using it as a tool to denounce the Pinochet regime and preserve memories silenced by official narratives. Allende's work bridges personal and political spheres, giving voice to the oppressed and fostering social consciousness about human rights violations. The narrative structure of the novel incorporates polyphony, blending multiple voices and perspectives. It challenges the unitarian view of history perpetuated by ruling powers, offering a pluralistic approach to life experiences. The epilogue ties together past, present, and future, encouraging readers to revisit the text for deeper understanding. The article also aims at highlighting the ambivalent relationship between Testimonio and the literary establishment, often seen as a hybrid nature as a blend of oral testimony and written literature. It critiques the exclusion of subaltern voices from traditional literary discourse. The genre encourages rethinking the exclusionary practices within literary discourse.

Keywords

Testimonio, Polyphony, Alternative History, Human Rights Violation,
The House of Spirits, Pinochet Dictatorship, Latina Feminism.

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Genres in literature are the result of changes in the social and political spectrum thereby literature is a form of discourse used to reorder social instability. A new genre is the product of this literary discourse. Testimonio is a genre of literature that retells historical events using literary elements such as dialogue, poetry and metaphors from an eyewitness perspective. It is produced by “members of dominant classes in society who tend to represent and naturalize differences as it is seen from their social and cultural position” (Gugelberger and Kearney 3). The term comes originally from Latin America and the Spanish term “*testimonio*” when it emerged from human rights tribunals, truth commissions, and other international human rights instruments in countries such as Chile and Argentina.

In defining Testimonio we have to acknowledge considerable diversity and plurality in the experience. Most testimonios share certain common characteristics. They are normally told from the perspective of an individual, the individual’s experience serving as an allegory for the communal experience. According to Zimmerman, “Testimonio calls into question the very institution of literature as ideological apparatus of alienation and domination” (58). The author has been a victim of an intense traumatic historical or social upheaval and has been oppressed or silenced. The testimonio has a non-traditional structure in which the author includes newspaper clippings, quotes from leaders and popular mythology.

Testimonios are prompted by intense social and or political upheaval, for e.g. the Latin American testimonios were inspired by Cuban Revolution (1959), the Bay of Pigs (1961), the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua (1979). This form of expression soon developed in Mexico, Bolivia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Chile, El Salvador and Honduras. After the dictatorial regimes in Latin America, the testimonio emerged like narratives.

Many Latin American authors wrote Testimonios when they were in exile. Mario Vargas Llosa wrote the *Feast of Goat* about the dictatorship of Rafael Trugillo in Dominican Republic. Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marques wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This is a spectrum of fictional narrative spanning hundred years of oppressive

and exploitative events in many Latin American nations. Chilean author Isabelle Allende wrote *The House of the Spirits* to exorcise the ghosts of the Pinochet dictatorship.

The House of the Spirits spans three generations of history in Chile (which remains unnamed), through the eyes of the Trueba family. *The House of Spirits* evolved into a book manuscript when Isabel Allende received a phone call that her 99-year-old grandfather was near death, and sat down to write him a letter and thereby keep him alive, at least in spirit. The novel glides from what seems to be the turn of the century through the election of a socialist president, to the military coup that turns the country into a dictatorship and police state.

History is not a single, linear truth, but rather a collage of memories, experiences and interpretations. It is the job of the historian to explore the past from many perspectives and to consider the complexities that have not only triggered an historical episode but have also shaped its memory. Testimonios created spaces for Latina feminisms, confronting established and contested terms, identities, frameworks and coalitions that have emerged in particular historical contexts. Women writing testimonios are charting their own course through these contesting terrains, creating their own social and discursive space. Writers of testimonios come from line of workers, activists, theorists and writers within the community. Allende wanted to reconstruct the lost world, resuscitate the dead, reunite the dispersed, and retain the memories forever. She said, "In exile, literature gave me a voice; it rescued my memories from the curse of oblivion; it enabled me to create a universe of my own" (12).

Testimonial discourse is the site of nexus between the personal and the political. While personal refers to a private, domestic, or intimate sphere, the political is the public, historic or collective one. The writers express that the personal is political by familial terms such as a mother where as a testimonial subject she enters into the public domain. Isabel Allende's works assess Chilean alternative history in the form of a Testimonio. Authoritarian regimes and, specifically, Pinochet's military rule gave rise to contradictory truth paradigms. Official history always represented a sympathetic view of the dictator. This truth paradigm is challenged by alternative history which denounced human rights violations, oppression and repression under the dictator.

Allende was always aware of the discrepancy between Chilean official history and Chilean reality under Pinochet's dictatorship. Allende exposes the essence of alternative and official history and the function which alternative history seeks to serve in Latin America. Her work gives voice to opposing truth paradigms. She did not experience torture and persecution first hand as she was in voluntary exile. Nonetheless, she merged the roles of narrator and author, identifying her journalistic activities as primary sources for the denunciation of persecution, torture and death. The writing process served her to rebuild the bridge from the past to the present. She put into writing what she wanted to rescue from forgetting. The emotional force and intellectual depth of testimonio develop a springboard for theorizing about latinidades in the academy, in the communities and in their personal lives.

The antagonistic relationship between alternative and official history is central to her work. She challenged official history is exposed in the larger framework of the novel, specifically in the preface and the socio political and literary contexts into which the testimonio enters upon publication. Her exposes sets straight the distorted picture of the Chilean experience perpetuated by the ruling voice. Her works aim at forming a

national and international social consciousness aware of the human rights violations, persecution and repression experienced.

However in her narratives, it is the interplay between these paradigms that mirror the prototype of relationships between official and alternative history under dictatorship rule. *The House of the Spirits* conveys a pluralistic approach towards life experience through polyphony of voices. According to the narrator, the principal foundation of the story is provided by Clara's life journal in which she initially recorded only important and later trivial events and observations. Clara's grandmother Elba serves in the role of Narrator, Compiler and Commentator. She recounts the generations of life's experiences in the presumptuous voice of a third person narrator who overwrites the journals autobiographical "I" changing it into a distant she.

Isabel Allende addresses the pre narration and narration process of her novel not in intra textual editorial commentary but in post – publication academic exchanges in this extended socio political and literary framework of the novel, she identifies her narrative as a socio political tool. She wrote the novel knowing that Pinochet's regime censored the representation of history. She thought it necessary to present the truth she knew through a literary work that would serve to denounce the Chilean experience, an experience official history had silenced and denied. Thereby she hoped to aid the formation of a social consciousness aware of human rights in fraction under the dictatorship rule and the struggle of the under-represented, the oppressed and repressed in Latin America in general. Isabel pronounces the dichotomous relationship between the ruling powers and the oppressed, the perpetrators and the victims and the witness of human rights in fraction. It enunciates the role of alternative history in Latin American society and the interplay in which it involves official history while giving voice to testimonio.

The epilogue of the novel brings the polyphony voices together and also the times, the past the present and the future. It concludes the narrative and hands it over to the reader, suggesting, at the very least, the turning of pages back to the beginning to continue the sentence that links the last to the first and to re-initiate the process of reading, which will like any other reading will never be the same again. Marcelo Coddou characterizes *The House of Spirits* as a socio-political criticism "against an official version of history which wants to be considered Unitarian" (Coddou 69).

Testimonio has had an ambivalent relationship with the literary establishment. It is, after all, a hybrid form, representing the conversion of oral testimony into writing. By equating history and literature with writing and modern culture and folktales and testimonies with orality and traditional culture, Western intellectuals have vigorously defended their disciplines in order to prevent their contamination by an indigestible Other, but testimonio, written like literature and occasionally endowed with recognizable artistic merit, generated a provocative debate over the definition of Literature itself, the potential for subaltern subjects to communicate through it, and their historic exclusion from it. Moreover, Testimonio served as a medium through which literary theorists could seriously rethink the refusal of their own discipline to make room for subaltern others, and to acknowledge that historically the discourse of Literature has been a discourse of exclusion.

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