

The “other” side of history as depicted in Isabel Allende’s *Of Love and Shadows*¹

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Abstract

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*The proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa have once again foregrounded the trauma involved in reconstructing a past fraught with political and personal violence and have, at the same time, also illustrated the therapeutic quality of testimony. Literature has always played a vital role in the process of coming to terms with reality. As a woman within a postcolonial context,² Isabel Allende bears witness to political oppression and gender discrimination in her novels. They serve as examples of testimonial literature which focus on the plight of women as marginalized citizens and represent a collective conscience in testimony to the atrocities of the past. This is accomplished through the interaction of her fictional characters with a recognizable historical context. In *Of Love and Shadows*, her female protagonist, Irene, asserts her individuality through writing/reporting which questions the validity of the male-oriented and so-called “objective” historical reportage. By creating disparate and complementary perspectives which accentuate the female/personal as well as the male/public aspects of experience, Allende proposes a recognition of the personal and the peripheral in the documentation of historical events; she underlines the validity of the “other” side of experience and history.*

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- 1 For the benefit of readers who are not familiar with Latin American literature and to avoid fragmenting the argument with too much detail, I have introduced additional information in the form of explanatory footnotes.
 - 2 As Colás (1995:382) indicates in his article on this subject, the term *postcolonial* cannot be summarily applied to Latin American studies without amplification. However, I wish to argue that Allende’s awareness of history and her position as a woman within the Latin American context – as a native of Chile with its own burden of a “colonial” heritage – presuppose her participation in a discourse which subverts and challenges the dominant discourse(s) of colonizing forces.

1. Literature as therapy

Although the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa have elicited controversial reactions, they have once again foregrounded the trauma involved in reconstructing a past fraught with political and personal violence. However, they have also illustrated the therapeutic quality of testimony and, as experience has shown, it is only by coming to terms with reality and recording the injustices committed in the past, that the ghosts can be exorcised and reconciliation can occur.

Literature plays a vital role in this process as it provides a means of self-expression to aid in the reconstruction of a fragmented sense of identity and ultimately serve as an act of restitution. Manzor-Coats (1990:158) emphasizes the cathartic value of writing when she states that "by being able to name the terror and physical pain of torture, the fragmented subject is able to reconstitute him/herself and companions, dead or alive, through writing". Allende (1989b:43) places it in an even broader context when she explains that

In the process of writing the anecdotes of the past, and recalling the emotions and pains of my fate, and telling part of the history of my country, I found that life became more comprehensible and the world more tolerable. I felt that my roots had been recovered and that during that patient exercise of daily writing I had also recovered my own soul.

Within this context, it would seem appropriate to question whether Latin American literature, and in particular the novels of Isabel Allende, could serve as an example of how to come to terms with our South African past.

I would like to suggest that South Africa has many issues in common with the Latin American situation and that writing about these issues could only strengthen our understanding of ourselves and others. My article proposes that Isabel Allende, in her novel *Of Love and Shadows*, bears testimony to the therapeutic value of literature and stresses its significance as an alternative source of history.³ Such an approach could only benefit South African literature in an attempt to "re-write" the past.

An overview of Latin American literature reflects a close relationship between history and literature – similar to the South African literary scene where the

3 Two disparate articles published in *Literator* by Mabel Erasmus (1995) and Cathy Maree (1995) respectively, also draw attention to the importance of confronting the past. While Erasmus stresses the value of literature as an alternative source of history in South Africa, Maree illustrates how a comparison of Ariel Dorfman and Athol Fugard could enhance an understanding of the past.

realist novel dominated for a long time. It was in reaction to political oppression that literature in Latin America acquired its distinctive innovative thrust and subversive quality: in resistance to the restrictions of censorship,⁴ the “boom writers”⁵ invented magic realism; in opposition to the patriarchal system and their absence from history, feminist writers raised their voices and, in objection to the oppression of political regimes both women and marginalized societies began to question the validity of historical documentation.⁶ They constructed their own versions of historical events that resulted in testimonial literature or, the “other” side of history and proved to the world that the inexpressible needs to be expressed and reconstructed in order to come to terms with reality and contemplate a viable future.

In South Africa, people now have to confront similar problems in coming to terms with their past: they have also suffered from the limitations of censorship, the injustices of racial discrimination and the marginalization of women – double marginalization in the case of indigenous women.⁷ Consequently, similar to the Latin American example, autobiographical and testimonial writing have also assumed significance as contemporary genres.

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- 4 Doris Meyer (1988a:6) comments on the scope of colonial censorship which extended “from the burning of Mayan bark-paper ‘books’, effectively silencing an entire indigenous culture, to the cloistering of women’s minds, virtually denying female participation in the power structure”.
 - 5 Latin American literature became more popular in the 1960s and 70s due to various causes, among others, the influence of exiles fleeing from political oppression and the translation of Latin American texts written in Spanish into European languages. This period, referred to as the “Boom” period, includes authors such as Cortázar, Vargas Llosa, García Márquez and Fuentes (Laguardia & Chevigny, 1986:29).
 - 6 The main criticism against official historical documentation and the literary canon has been that they reflect a predominantly male and elitist perspective on events. It is generally argued that women, minorities and the voice of the collective have been excluded from these processes, and that this situation has resulted in a distorted representation of history and literature in particular. As Irvine (1986:24) clearly points out: “... the absence of women’s perspective within the culture, within the critical community and within the fictional universe affects contexts, and also affects the very structures of narratives”.
 - 7 In discussing the plight of women, Elleke Boehmer (1995:224) refers to the situation of indigenous women and claims that “colonized women were, as it is called, doubly or triply marginalized. That is to say, they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class, and, in some cases, religion and caste”.

2. Testimony and the collective conscience

Allende not only considers herself as a part of history but also feels responsible for her part in it.⁸ Her attempt to bear witness to oppressive practices is to keep them alive in the collective memory and to avoid their repetition and perpetuation because as she (Allende, 1986:43) claims:

[At some moment in time these horrible events will come to light and when that happens my collected stories will not have been lost but will serve as historical testimony – translated: MJW.]

En algún momento esos horrendos acontecimientos saldrían a la luz y cuando eso sucediera, las historias recopiladas por mí no se habrían perdido, servirían como testimonio histórico.

Allende (1986:46) regards violence as another dimension of our being and says that when we cross the frontier to that side we can only attempt to survive by clinging to the familiar. This statement is reminiscent of Marlow's in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. When Marlow is confronted with the unknown, the "heart of darkness" represented by his physical environment as well as the dark reaches of the human mind, he can only retain his sanity by clinging to matters of routine, to the superficial but safe realities of everyday life. In the same manner, Allende acknowledges the potential for violence in each one of us but maintains that the known, familiar circumstances or the power of love and compassion could serve to contain these forces. These paradoxical emotions and experiences of violence and love (Allende, 1986:43) are clearly expressed in the title of her second novel, *Of Love and Shadows*. In a paper given at Montclair State College, she translates these contrasting elements in her writing into "ink, blood and kisses" (Thomson Shields, 1990:79).

For Allende, the act of writing then assumes a three-fold meaning: it is a cathartic exercise to come to terms with the past and to establish an identity; a personal testimony to political oppression and a means of preserving an unofficial "record" of events. Consequently, Allende's first two novels, *The House of the Spirits* and *Of Love and Shadows* were both written with specific historical events⁹ in mind: *The House of the Spirits* represents her youth while *Of Love and Shadows*

8 Like Elena Poniatowska, she is well educated and from a privileged background. As a result of these facts, she finds it even more important to fight all forms of oppression.

9 Although not explicitly identified, the novels refer to the regimes of the marxist Salvador Allende (1970-1973) and the military dictator Augusto Pinochet in Chile (1973-1990) respectively.

has served to exorcise the rage and hatred¹⁰ which festered inside her as a result of political crimes committed against the people of Chile. By writing these texts, she was finally able to write *Eva Luna* and to reconcile the past with the present in an attempt to construct a new future.

Although Allende's response to oppression is cast in a fictional mould, her novels reflect a testimonial quality similar to the testimonies given by victims of oppression who, in their personal capacity, also bear witness as part of a collective experience.¹¹ Manzor-Coats (1990:159) astutely points out the subversive quality of such literature when she claims that "this collective 'we' can also be read as a challenge to the function and textual presence of authority". Allende's personal experience informs her fictional characters. They constitute an unmistakable part of the collective conscience within a particular historical context and illustrate "the connection between political forces and individual lives" which Stone (1989:35) considers to be the key element in a successful political novel. As one of her devoted readers claims, she recreates "the forbidden and secret history that nevertheless is still alive in the memories of most Chileans" (Allende, 1989b:57).

3. Personal versus official history

As a woman and victim of political oppression¹² in her native Chile, Isabel Allende is acutely aware of the disparity between personal and official history. Like several other contemporary Latin American women authors, such as Elena Poniatowska in Mexico and Luisa Valenzuela in Argentina, she subscribes to social equality for women and justice for the oppressed.¹³ Consequently, the female protagonists in her first three novels *Eva Luna* (1989b), *The House of the Spirits* (1990a) and *Of Love and Shadows* (1990b) all assert an independent spirit

10 Allende felt enraged because she had to live the life of an exile and therefore had to come to terms with the injustices of a repressive system and the loss of her family and friends.

11 Lillian Manzor-Coats (1990:158) explains that although testimonial literature was already used by the "chroniclers of the conquest of the New World", the contemporary type of testimonial literature constitutes "a collective document representative not of an individual but of a common collective struggle". Examples of testimonial literature would be: *Si me permiten hablar* by Domitila Barrios de Chungara (1978) and *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* by Rigoberta Menchú (1985).

12 As the niece of Salvador Allende she was forced to flee Chile with her family after the coup in 1973 to find asylum in Venezuela (Allende, 1988:240).

13 Both these authors have written about oppression in various forms, for example, Poniatowska's novel *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1984) and Valenzuela's novel *The lizard's tail* (1983) [*Cola de lagartija*] address the plight of women and the perpetration of social and political injustices.

and exercise the freedom of choice. They represent the "other" side of history by subverting official discourse through disparate perspectives in order to constitute a collective conscience.

It is Allende's particular concern that the personal histories of political oppression – the voices of women and the people – have been neutralized by ostensibly "objective" historical reportage. Her main objective is then to illustrate how unrepresentative historical reportage is and to plead for a composite record of events which would take the personal histories into account and keep alive the memories of atrocities committed in the name of justice. She (Allende, 1987:56) asserts that

[The loss of the past created an anxiety in me. On a historical level, and within the context of a country, it is serious to forget the past. One has to recover memory in order to extract experience for the future. That is why it is important for me to keep memory alive – translated: MJW.]

Me producía angustia la pérdida del pasado. A nivel histórico, a nivel de un país, es grave olvidar el pasado. Hay que recuperar la memoria para sacar experiencia para el futuro. Por eso es importante para mí mantener vivo el recuerdo.

Her profession as a reporter and her experiences as a woman and an exile have provided her with sufficient material to construct "her" version of "his" story/history. The result is a dissolution of the boundaries between fiction and history, creating a dialectic between fiction and reality and subverting the official versions of events. Allende (1989b:47) conflates fiction and history, the personal and the political when she states that "there is a world of fiction created by the official discourse, and another world of blood and pain and love, where we have struggled for centuries". Her fictional versions of history become metaphors or allegories of experience which include the reader in the reconstruction of events to create a dimension of personal involvement and responsibility. The open endings of her novels then force the reader to assess his/her own stance and realize his/her complicity in the past and in future developments. The reader must realize that he/she has the power to change the future and discredit the past.

In correspondence with the rich texture of Latin American history and its relationship to literature,¹⁴ Allende transforms the past to explicate the present or, as Coddou (1987:12) states, she writes to question the past in order to acknowledge an understanding of a present conflict ["cuestionar el pasado para

14 The early chronicles about the history of Latin America display a significant combination of history and fiction

acceder a una comprensión de un conflictivo presente”]. It is this quality in literature that Earle (1987:544) identifies when he claims that the Latin American context “invites storytelling and sharpens historical awareness, for history is something that needs constantly to be deciphered through literature – probably its best instrument”. A constant dialectic then exists between telling *stories* and *telling* stories – fabricating and re-constructing.

4. *Of Love and Shadows*

4.1 Women and identity

Her second novel, *Of Love and Shadows*, was constructed around a political incident concerning the theme of *desaparecidos*¹⁵ in the vicinity of Lonquén in Chile (Allende, 1986:43). In an interview with Moody, she points out the significance of the novel (1986:43) as a first attempt to expose the crimes of Chile’s authoritarian government. In *Of Love and Shadows*, Allende subverts the official account of a specific historic event in Chile by describing a personal interpretation of the event which puts the historical account’s “veracity and objectivity” (Muñoz, 1991:62) into question. She becomes an indirect witness (Muñoz, 1991:64), and in the process makes the reader aware that [a reading of *De amor y sombra* as a fictionalized testimonial presents a dramatic image of the human beings, good and bad, who breathe behind the official history]:

La lectura De amor y de sombra nos proporciona mediante la ficcionalización del testimonio una imagen dramática de los seres humanos que, buenos y malos, palpitan detrás de la historia oficial (Weaver, 1991:79).

Irene Beltrán becomes the fictional representative of the historical Allende in duplicating her attempts to record events with the aid of a tape recorder, from notes written down in Sergeant Faustino Rivera’s notebook (*Love*:246), with photographs taken by Francisco or by attempting to publish articles. These “records” all serve to point towards the government’s duplicity.

Of Love and Shadows relates the story of a young reporter, Irene Beltrán and her boyfriend Francisco who is a photographer. In the course of her work, Irene becomes involved in the story of a young peasant girl, Evangelina Ranquileo, who is reputed to be able to perform miracles and has consequently acquired the reputation of a saint. Her mysterious disappearance, similar to many other people under the authoritarian government, causes Irene and Francisco to start a search for her. This experience triggers an awareness of personal and political

15 The term *desaparecidos* is usually used to refer to the countersubversive tactics of the military regimes of Argentina, Chile, etc. in the 1970s

responsibility in Irene and gives her the courage to assert herself as a woman. Against the background of political intrigue, Allende then traces the lives of two young people and their reactions to political injustice. It is by intertwining the personal and the political, the fictional and the historical, that Allende constructs her testimony.

Like *The House of the Spirits*, *Of Love and Shadows* also depicts the limitations of traditional womanhood. The mother, Beatriz, epitomizes traditional values while the daughter is given the opportunity, through her relationship with Francisco, to develop into an independent woman. She learns to resist conventions and reject petty and meaningless restrictions on her freedom as an individual and to depend on her own intelligence and resources for survival. Gordon (1987:536) notes that Beatriz, true to the social mould into which she has been cast, clings to appearances and she refuses to accept the government's duplicity – just like she refuses to admit that her husband has finally deserted her. Her stance is clearly described as conscious ignorance:

She adjusted to the new system as if she had been born to it, and learned never to speak of what it was best never to know. Ignorance was indispensable to peace of mind (*Love*:257)¹⁶

When Irene is shot, Beatriz claims that the bullets must have been intended for some thug (*Love*:266). Unable to face the truth (*Love*:277) and accept responsibility, Beatriz wallows in her own selfish pursuits remaining "oblivious to the public outcry that, in spite of censorship, swept the nation and traveled around the globe, once again making front-page news of the *desaparecidos* under Latin American dictatorships" (*Love*:267-268).

Irene Beltrán is also at first "partly imprisoned in her mother's world" (Gordon, 1987:536), a situation which appears similar to the predicament of Rosa Burger in Gordimer's novel, *Burger's Daughter* (1987b) – although in this novel Rosa lives in her famous father's shadow. However, in both cases the operative word is "choice" as both these young women show resilience, courage and inventiveness in choosing their own futures. Caught up in a middle-class environment and values (*Love*:148), Irene Beltrán has her comfortable world rudely disturbed when she investigates the story of the disappearance of Evangelina Ranquileo. Like most people, Irene only realizes the impact of political events in the country when she becomes involved with this story at first hand. Meyer (1988b:156) describes Irene's political awareness as her "fall from innocence" and claims that

16 *Love* refers to: Allende, Isabel 1990b. *Of Love and Shadows* (Margaret Savers Peden, Trans.) London: Black Swan

this central metaphor in *De amor y de sombra* is an incentive for women to “turn silent complicity into outspoken activism” (Meyer, 1988b:157). He furthermore claims that instead of shielding their daughters from the truth, women must demand the truth and so “reclaim their share of control over history. Women’s condition as exile must end” (Meyer, 1988:157).

As Gordon (1987:537) observes, Evangelina’s case can be regarded as symbolic of the oppressed forces in the Chilean society. In her attempt to come to terms with political reality, Irene delves into the mystery of Evangelina and unearths unpleasant “truths”: the discovery of Evangelina’s body in a mass grave. This discovery changes Irene’s life because until then she had been “educated to deny any unpleasantness, discounting it as distortion of the facts” (*Love*:123) and it also serves as a concrete example of the military regime’s duplicity, or hidden agenda. The truth cannot be ignored indefinitely because Irene’s search produces irrefutable evidence which contradicts official versions of history. Irene’s personal life then becomes inevitably linked to political events. She is forced to take a stand and obey her conscience in order to realize her responsibility as a woman and a citizen and she illustrates how a woman can transcend conventional and political barriers to trust in her instincts and sense of justice.

By relating her personal experience of events, Irene not only gains a clear perspective of her own position and responsibility, but also exposes the hypocrisy and blatant lies of official accounts. Her account therefore contradicts and undermines the validity of official documentation.

4.2 Relationships and responsibility

Irene’s transition from submissive fiancée to independent woman is clearly illustrated in her relationships with Gustavo Morante and Francisco Leal respectively. Whereas the first relationship is subject to conventional behaviour, the second is based on equality, the sharing of responsibility and the lack of restrictions. It is this latter situation which Allende regards as the ideal as she (Allende, 1989b:54) explains:

It’s not a question of changing male chauvenism (*sic*) for militant feminism, but of giving both women and men a chance to become better people and to share the heavy burden of this planet.

The various other relationships in the novel illustrate different facets of male/female cooperation and reveal interesting interpretations of marital responsibility. The partnership experienced by Irene and Francisco is not evident in the other marriages: whereas the Leals seem to enjoy a comfortable marriage, the Ranquileos ostensibly enjoy a satisfactory marriage because the wife, Digna, makes all the sacrifices and assumes all the responsibilities. The belief that

women should be subservient to men is ingrained in society, as Pradelio's perception of his parents' marriage illustrates. Yet, although he "had witnessed similar scenes before, and in his heart even believed that a man has the right to keep his wife and children in line" (*Love*:170) Pradelio still interferes when he sees his mother's suffering.

Apart from illustrating the ideal male/female relationship, Irene and Francisco's relationship also illustrates how the personal is inextricably linked to the political and is intended to create political conscientization (Campos, 1989:197-198). Evangelina's death sets in motion a chain of events which expose the hypocrisy and deviousness of the government. Irene's involvement causes the various people and officers concerned to face the facts of political oppression. Their personal implication in the events force both Pradelio Ranquileo, Evangelina's brother, and Gustavo Morante (*Love*:261), Irene's ex-fiancé, to recognize their responsibility and to feel betrayed by the army that they had until then supported in the interests of their country. They had succumbed to the feeling of power and had been fed lies about the political situation and the secret enemy supposedly poised to take over the country. Pradelio's innocent opinion becomes an ironic comment¹⁷ on the machinations of authoritarian regimes:

The enemy must truly have been dangerous and skillful, because to that day no one had ever learned of their bloodthirsty plans except the commanders of the armed forces, who were always vigilant on behalf of the nation's interests (*Love*:173).

The government then manages to evade criticism by claiming patriotism as an excuse for suppressing the supposedly subversive activities aimed against the country (*Love*:238). Consequently, the unnatural becomes natural and commonplace – violence becomes an ordinary occurrence (*Love*:219). This situation is echoed in many countries around the world where people refuse to become involved and assume political accountability. Censorship, oppressive regimes and fear create cowardice and blunt initiative, with the result that few people take positive action to correct injustices. Allende (1986:47) pinpoints this obvious flaw in human nature and appeals to our conscience when she claims that people had all the proof in front of them but they refused to see it. ["Tenían todas las pruebas ante los ojos, pero se negaban a verlas."]

17 These words echo the thoughts of the Magistrate in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The enemy is and remains a figment of an uneasy imagination.

4.3 A question of perspective

Similar to *A Sport of Nature* (Gordimer, 1987b) where the photograph of Hillela's mother represents a moment in time and a memory which does not capture the complexities of life, memory also acquires an interesting dimension through the concept of photography in *Of Love and Shadows*. Francisco Leal, Irene's friend and a photographer by profession, is at hand to photograph the subject Evangelina and any other events which might be of interest. Yet, the concept of immobilizing history and memory in a photograph only presents one dimension of reality and therefore does not provide sufficient evidence of the multiple versions of reality. Barbara Harlow (1987:83) points out that photographs, "while they preserve the memories and genealogical existence of a culture and a heritage, nonetheless stop short of disclosing the context within which they are implicated". In the same way, the official history only conveys one side, or the public side of events. For a complete account, the multiple perspectives of witnesses should be included.

Of Love and Shadows could then be read within the tradition of testimonial writing because an awareness of a collective consciousness is introduced through the account of personal experience. Allende's account of events could represent the account of a historical witness and her text could serve as the counternarrative – including different perspectives – to historical documentation. In fact, Allende becomes the mediator between the protagonist and the reader in the same way as Moema Viezzer interprets Domitila Barrios de Chungara's experience (1978) and Elsa Joubert interprets Poppie Nongena's life (Joubert, 1978).

5. Conclusion

For Allende, writing becomes a means of confronting and exposing official silence by keeping the collective memory alive. Coddou (1989:90) implicitly admits this dimension in literature when he refers to it as this other form of conscience that is literature ["esta otra forma de conciencia que es la literatura"].

The idea of survival features strongly in Allende's works, especially women as survivors, and Gordon (1987:535) observes that

De amor y de sombra instead seems to be saying that love can survive even in the shadow of Big Brother steadily watching, can survive physical agony and the threat of death, and perhaps also that love needs the shadow to become most fully love.

However, love might be too simplistic a term for the sentiments that Allende is trying to portray. Perhaps hope would be a better description of her intention as the title of one of her articles, "Writing as an act of hope" (1989b), illustrates. In

her novels, she attempts to reconstruct the lives of the "other(s)" whose experiences have been absent from recorded history/official documentation; she creates different versions of history which subvert the official one and attain a testimonial quality emphasizing the interrelationship between personal and political experience. By constructing a dialogue between male and female as well as a dialectic between personal and official, historical and fictional, she can represent both sides of the "story".

But, most important of all, writing gives us hope as Allende (1988b:45) clearly indicates when she maintains that

In a novel we can give an illusory order to chaos. We can find the key to the labyrinth of history. We can make excursions into the past, to try to understand the present and dream the future.

Perhaps the message that South Africans should heed would be to use their past in constructing a better future.

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