

“The Spirit of Women”: Magic Realism and Resistance in Isabel Allende’s

The House of the Spirits

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Abstract

Magic realism is a literary technique that combines the normal and the mundane with the abnormal and the fantastical in a realistic setting where people perceive everything as ordinary. Authors have been using this literary technique since the early 20th century; however, people did not widely discuss magic realism until the Latin American literary boom in the 1950s through the 1970s. During the boom, many authors used magic realism to portray social concerns, political injustices, and various types of oppression. While Isabel Allende incorporates the common theme of political oppressions, she set herself apart by using magic realism to portray feminist matters regarding patriarchal oppression. Drawing from the critic, Wendy B. Faris, this thesis portrays how Allende uses Faris's five elements of magic realism in her novel *The House of the Spirits*, 1982. Faris's five elements are the irreducible elements – the things and events that are perceived as abnormal; the merging realms – the interconnection between the living and the spirits; the disruption of time, space, and identity – the multivocal interpretations of dimensions and identity; the phenomenal world – the existential world; and the unsettling doubt – the way readers react to magic realism. This thesis examines how Allende uses each of these elements to expose and challenge political and patriarchal oppression within Chile during the 20th century.

Introduction

In the 1950s through the 1970s, the Latin American literary boom, known as “el boom,” heightened international awareness toward Latin American authors who wrote with a specific narrative technique called magic realism. However, before authors used the term magic realism in literature, people associated the term with a modern art movement in the early 1900s in Europe. The term originated from the German art critic Franz Roh in his 1925 publication, “Nach-Expressionismus - Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei” [“Post Expressionism: Magical Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting”]. In the article, “‘Unexpected Alterations of Reality’: Magical Realism in Painting and Literature,” Danijela D. Kostadinović explains how Roh’s neologism distinguished abstract-expressionist paintings from post-expressionist paintings. Roh’s term magic realism established a way of observing mystical, supernatural, and mysterious objects in paintings. He wanted the mysterious and mystical objects to be “perceived as part of the reality, and not something opposite to it, or something that comes into conflict with it” (Kostadinović 41). How art critics viewed magic realism in art became the way literary critics viewed magic realism in literature. The critics perceived the mystical, supernatural, and mysterious elements as part of reality, and those elements did not conflict with reality. The function of magic realism attracted and influenced literary critics and authors when Roh’s essay was translated into Spanish and published in Madrid in 1927.

Since magic realism entered the realm of literature, it has gone through a series of developments, particularly in Latin American literature. One of the first Latin American authors to use magic realism was the Argentine author, Jorge Luis Borges, in his

collection of short stories *Ficciones* [*Fictions*, 1944] and *El aleph* [*Aleph*, 1949]. For this reason, Angel Flores, a Puerto Rican literary critic, considered Borges “the pioneer of this literary movement” (Kostadinović 43). Still, the utilization of magic realism in literature had not gained universal appraisal until “el boom” during the 1950s through the 1970s. Maggie Ann Bowers explains in her book, *Magic(al) Realism: The New Critical Idiom*, that the appearance of magic realism in literature was a modernist movement. Authors used this literary technique to “break away from previous literary traditions and to find a new means of expression” (Bowers 34). During “el boom,” many authors who sought new expression toward political and social issues utilized magic realism in their literature because they lacked political power. As a result, magic realism acted like a vehicle to express the authors’ ideologies toward political injustices and human rights violations in a covert way. For this reason, people strongly associate magic realism with the theme of oppression.

Many authors from Latin America have become renowned for using magic realism to express their concerns regarding oppression. One of the most famed authors of “el boom” includes Alejo Carpentier, the Cuban author of *El reino de este mundo* [*The Kingdom of this World*, 1949]. In this novel, Carpentier presents the discourse of slavery during the French colonial period in Haiti in the 1800s. Another notable author of magic realism is Gabriel García Márquez, from Columbia, who achieved the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982. Márquez is well-known for his magic realist novel *Cien años de soledad* [*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967], which epitomizes his views regarding socio-political discourse within Latin America.

Before “el boom,” and during “el boom,” many male authors thrived in the realm of literature due to their implementation of magic realism. However, female authors who incorporated elements of magic realism in their writing long before “el boom” did not profit with the same appraisal as male authors did. One such author is María Luisa Bombal, the Chilean author of *La última niebla* [*House of Mist*, 1935]. In the article, “*House of Mist* and *La última niebla*: María Luisa Bombal Between Two Wor(l)ds,” Alice Edwards emphasizes the importance of magic realism in Bombal’s work. Edwards states that Bombal portrays “feminist exploration of women’s desire and self-actualization,” and asserts that Bombal’s work often goes “ignored” by the literary critics (47). Though female authors used magic realism in their literature before and during “el boom,” it was not until the 1980s that a female, Latin American author, gained international recognition for using this literary technique.

After “el boom,” Isabel Allende, a Chilean author, attained recognition around the world for her magic realist novel *La Casa de los espíritus* [*The House of the Spirits*, 1982]. However, unlike the predominant male Latin American authors who preceded Allende, she used magic realism to draw attention toward political matters within Latin America as well as feminist matters. Allende, therefore, became a key figure for female authors writing with the elements of magic realism. In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende exposes both patriarchal and political oppression through three generations of a Chilean family. In the first half of the novel, Allende uses magic realism as a resource for many of the female characters who sustain patriarchal oppression delivered by a central male figure. Allende shifts the second part of her novel from patriarchal oppression and illustrates more political oppression. However, she continues to use magic realism as a

resource for her characters to survive and resist political oppression, representing the totalitarian Pinochet Regime in 1973.

So far, this introduction has addressed a few prominent works of magical realism – but what is magic realism? Since authors began using magic realism in literature, literary critics have explored various ways to define and identify how magic realism functions in literature. However, each definition varies to some degree. One commonality amid the various definitions is that magic realism is a narrative that combines elements of realism and elements of the fantastical. When authors combine these two contrasting elements, the two blends together, and all events, whether they are mundane or fantastical, are perceived as “ordinary.” Tamás Bényei discusses in his article, “Rereading ‘Magic Realism,’” some of the various definitions literary critics offer when defining magic realism. For example, the author Rawdon Wilson defines magical realism as:

The purely natural way in which abnormal, experientially impossible (and empirically unverifiable) events take place. It is as if [the impossible events] had always already been there; their abnormality normalized from the moment their magic realist worlds were imagined. (Bényei 153)

Another definition by Evan-Pritchard, a professor at Oxford, states that “[magic realism] is not an alien element that arrives from the outside... All magic simply ‘was’ from the beginning an essential adjunct of all such things” (Bényei 151). Don Latham offers his definition of magic realism in his article, “The Cultural Works of Magical Realism in Three Young Adult Novels.” Latham says that magical realism is: “Neither fantasy nor realism, magical realism combines elements of both to present a matter-of-fact world in

which the extraordinary exists side by side with the mundane realities of everyday life” (59). Again, these definitions allude that amid the realism in magic realism, authors portray the fantastical elements as mundane, ordinary, and routine. However, this general notion does not help readers pinpoint the exact elements of magic realism.

Unlike the previous critics, Wendy B. Faris, a professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Texas at Arlington, formulates a specific and in-depth definition of magic realism. In Faris’s book, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, she defines magic realism by describing five elements that constitute magic realism. The terms she uses are the irreducible elements, the phenomenal world, the merging realms, the unsettling doubt, and the disruption of time, space, and identity. Faris’s five characteristics of magic realism are ubiquitous in Allende’s novel *The House of the Spirits*. In this novel, Allende uses the elements of magic realism to enable her characters to expose, challenge, and resist patriarchal oppression and the authoritarian political regime.

The Irreducible Element

The first element Faris uses to define magic realism is the “irreducible element.” Authors David Young and Keith Hollman coined the term in their anthology *Magic Realist Fiction*. Faris quotes Young and Holman in her essay, “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” and says that the irreducible elements are something readers “cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them” (167). The irreducible elements are the occurrences of things that may seem illogical, unfamiliar, abnormal, or bizarre within a narrative. However, the reader must

recognize that the irreducible elements attribute to other meanings. Allende utilizes the irreducible elements to represent and convey significant concepts and matters regarding patriarchal and political oppression.

Allende first uses magic realism when she describes the dog Barrabás, owned by Clara, the youngest child of the del Valle family. Barrabás embodies many irreducible elements. His tail grows to be “as long as a golf club,” and he resembles more characteristics of a “thoroughbred racer” than a dog (*Spirits* 21). The dog grows past the size of a full-grown sheep and into the size of a baby horse. He has “crocodile claws,” and when he becomes too large to sleep with Clara in her bed, he lies next to her with his “horses’ hoof” resting in her hand (*Spirits* 22). The abnormal and bizarre imagery of Barrabás introduces the readers to magic realism. More importantly, Allende uses Barrabás to acclimate her readers to her magic realism narrative. Through the acclimation process, Allende prepares the readers for when she uses the irreducible element to convey more critical messages regarding patriarchal and political oppression within Latin America.

Allende uses the irreducible elements to demonstrate that her male characters do not have as much control over the female characters as they would desire in a patriarchal society. For example, Clara embodies more irreducible elements than any other character, which she uses to exert a subliminal stance of power. Clara can “move objects without touching them,” and she learns to “predict the future and recognize people’s intentions” (*Spirits* 86). Allende writes:

She predicted her father’s hernia; all the earthquakes and other natural disturbances; the one and only time snow fell in the capital, freezing to death the

poor people in their shantytowns and the rose bushes in the gardens of the rich, and the identity of the murderer of school girls long before the police discovered the second corpse; but no one believed her. (86)

As Clara develops her repertoire of these abilities, she learns at a young age to use the skills to her advantage. For instance, when Clara's father demands that the gardener takes away Clara's myth-like dog, Barrabás, Clara terminates her father's orders. Clara says, "He's mine, Papa. If you take him away, I'll stop breathing and I promise you I'll die" (*Spirits* 21). Clara's father knows that what Clara says often comes true. Since the father fears that Clara may literally stop breathing and die, he leaves the dog untouched, and Clara, therefore, controls her father's decisions. Saving Barrabás is a small example of how Clara learns to control the actions and decisions of those around her. For Clara, this moment is a steppingstone and a point of realization that she does have some influence in a society where women are not as influential as men. With age, Clara develops her abilities even more and later uses them to restrict the control that her future patriarchal husband holds over her.

Allende also uses the irreducible elements to resist a cultural code of male behavior in Latin America called "machismo." In the book *Isabel Allende: A Critical Companion*, Karen Castellucci Cox states that machismo is a "system that has made women dependent, that requires them saintly conduct as wives and lifelong devotion of mothers" (21). Clara is aware of these cultural and conventional morés, which leads her to accept her destiny to "marry without love" (*Spirits* 101). However, upon marriage, Clara opposes her expectations as a wife and mother. Allende writes, "[Clara] forgot the names of the servants and even of her own children" (*Spirits* 143). Additionally, Clara

spends her days communicating with spirits by using her three-legged table instead of engaging in domestic duties. Clara's lack of servitude to her expected domestic role is one way she resists the demands of her patriarchal husband. Allende states in her memoir, *My Invented Country*, that "Chilean women are abettors of machismo" (53). For this reason, Allende creates characters who challenge the expected role of women in a machismo culture. Clara's acts of defiance facilitate Allende's belief that women are not mandated to fall victim to the cultural codes of machismo.

Many of Allende's applications of the irreducible elements represent acts of defiance toward female gender roles as if Allende is mocking the patriarchal agenda within Latin America. Allende does this by engrossing her female characters in a mythical realm that her male characters tolerate and often attempt to terminate. For example, Rosa, Clara's sister, pursues the expected duties of domesticity, but simultaneously, she mocks domesticity. Rosa exhibits mockery by embroidering "creatures that were half bird and half mammal, covered with iridescent feathers and endowed with horns and hooves, and so fat and with stubby wings that defied the laws of biology and aerodynamics" (*Spirits* 5). Her father demands that she pursue domestic skills that will prepare her for marriage. However, Rosa continues to rebel by sewing the largest tablecloth in the world, embellished with her "nightmarish zoology" (*Spirits* 6).

Clara also lacks many domestic skills, as knitting becomes the only domestic art "she ever mastered" (*Spirits* 88). Instead, Clara spends more time, "moving numerous different objects without touching them," and "practicing various techniques of prognostication" (*Spirits* 88). Many of characters mock their roles of domesticity in Allende's novel. Rosa sews myth-like creatures in her embroidery, Clara's daughter

Blanca makes myth-like creatures out of clay, and Blanca's daughter Alba paints myth-like creatures on her bedroom wall. The representation of myth-like creatures in each generation illustrates the continuous resistance and mockery toward patriarchal agendas within Latin America.

The Merging Realms

Another element of Faris's formulated definition of magic realism is the "merging realms." Faris explains the merging realms in her essay "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" as "fluid boundaries between the world of the living and dead" (172). The merging realms are ubiquitous in *The House of the Spirits* where apparitions "converse with human beings" (92); spirits whisper "behind the curtains" (101); Clara spends the years of her youth "wrapped in her fantasies, accompanied by the spirits of the air" (92); spirits tell Clara where buried treasure is (105); the spirits "transparent silhouettes [are] gliding down the hall (284); her husband's mansion becomes a place where the rooms are "full of whispering ghosts" (435). These succinct descriptions of the merging realms indicate how the living and the spirits interconnect and often correspond as if there is no barrier between the two.

However, critics such as Brenda Cooper claim that "attempts to capture reality by way of a depiction of life's many dimensions, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, rational and mysterious," result in an "exotic escape from reality" (qtd. in Bowers 126). In contrast to Cooper's claim, Allende's incorporation of the merging realms does not posit an exotic escape from reality. For example, when the military leaders of the Pinochet regime take Alba as prisoner, they bind and torture her. When Alba prepares to

accept death, she invokes her grandmother, Clara, from the merging realms, to help her die. At first glance, it may appear like Alba is attempting to escape her troubles and reality. However, when the spirit of Clara arrives, she discourages Alba's desire to die. Clara says, "the point was not to die, since death comes anyway, but to survive, which would be a miracle" (*Spirits* 414). According to John. L. Longeway's article, "The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception," escapism "draw[s] us away from our everyday troubles, and sometimes, to help us fantasize ourselves as better... and better off than we really are" (1). As noticed in this scene, Allende does not draw women away from their everyday troubles because Alba remains a tortured victim, contradicting Cooper's claim of escapism. In contrast, Clara encourages Alba to survive, and Alba finds the means to persevere her brutal reality. As a result, Allende empowers her female characters to survive the oppression during the Pinochet regime through the representation of the merging realms.

Ruth Jenkins discusses the positive effects of Allende's use of the ghosts and spirits in her article "Authorizing Female Voice and Experience: Ghosts and Spirits in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Allende's *The House of the Spirits*." Jenkins says that Allende's spirits are an "empowering quality" for women in a Chilean society (62). Empowerment is evident when Alba interacts with Clara in the merging realms. Clara empowers Alba and directs her to be the voice and to write the stories of the women who have suffered both patriarchal and political oppression. Clara tasks Alba to expose the brutal realities of the regime and the hardships women endure by mesogenic men, which illustrates how Allende's female characters defy silence in a patriarchal society. Clara tells Alba, "You have a lot to do, so stop feeling sorry for yourself, drink some water, and

start writing” (*Spirits* 414). At this point, Alba begins to defy the silence imposed on women and elaborates on the notes that Clara wrote during her years of silence that “bore witness to life” (*Spirits* 128). The reinforcement to survive reality draws from a “persistent tradition in Allende’s family,” as Peter G. Earle states in his article “Literature as Survival: Allende’s ‘*The House of the Spirits*’” (543). Allende says that “living on” is the goal and not escaping reality through death (543). Allende portrays this family tradition when Clara tells Alba that dying came anyways and that she must survive. Finally, the theme of “living on” coincides with the merging realms because to live on in memory is equivalent to staying alive in spirit, as Allende explains in an interview, “The Responsibility to Tell You,” by John Rodden. Allende explains that she initially wrote *The House of the Spirits* as a letter to her dying grandfather, which later evolved into the novel. Allende intended to keep her grandfather alive, “at least in spirit,” by writing the letter/novel (Rodden 114). The emphasis of surviving in spirit corresponds to Allende’s theme of survival with the merging realms.

Another draw from the merging realms is how Allende liberates her female characters from sanctioned gender roles. However, it is not feminine duties that women are trying to escape, rather the assertion of male dominance that comes with the designation of sanctioned gender roles. The critic, Lois Tyson, states in her book *Critical Theory Today*, that patriarchal ideologies “keep women and men in traditional gender roles and thereby maintain male dominance” (87). The most oppressed woman by sanctioned gender roles is Férula, a “tormented soul,” designated by Esteban, her brother. Férula is the permanent caretaker of their sick mother, Doña Ester. Allende illustrates how oppression accompanies sanctioned gender roles through the imagery of the

grotesque duties Férula must perform daily. Férula cleans her “mother’s ulcerated legs, washing her and sinking deeply in her stench and wretchedness, even peering into her bedpan” (*Spirits* 47). However, these sanctioned gender roles are inescapable for Férula, which she learns to cope with by taking “pleasure in humiliation and in menial tasks,” and by believing that she will go “to heaven by suffering terrible injustice” (*Spirits* 47). Férula, unable to make her own decisions, is left powerless because the domestic duties demanded by her brother, Esteban, continuously enslave her. Férula expresses contempt toward her duties and the desire to rid them and tells Esteban, “I would like to have been born a man so I could leave too” (*Spirits* 50). Esteban acknowledges Férula’s suffering without empathy and replies, “And I would not have liked to be a woman” (*Spirits* 50).

Esteban’s lack of compassion displays his power as a dominant male figure over his sister because he could free her from her oppressed position but does not. When Esteban has no more use for Férula upon their mother’s death, he abandons her in the streets when she continuously interferes with his marriage. When Esteban restricts Férula from engaging with his wife, Clara, he not only disempowers Férula, but he disrupts the sisterhood community. However, when Férula dies and transcends into the merging realms, she is liberated from Esteban’s oppression because the merging realms is a space he cannot control. Allende writes:

Férula appeared without the slightest warning...She entered the dining room just as Esteban was beginning to carve the roast, and they recognized her immediately, even though it had been six years since they last saw her and she looked very pale and a great deal older. (*Spirits* 164)

Due to the merging realms, Férula is now able to communicate with Clara, which Esteban had prohibited. Férula summons Clara in a spiritual form so Clara can tend to her body just after her death. After Férula transcends into the merging realms Esteban no longer controls her. With the aid of the merging realms, Allende liberates Férula from the confinements of a patriarchal society, and she reestablishes the female community through the merging realms.

Allende's female characters are empowered amid their patriarchal oppressors when they interact with the merging realms. As the women interact with the merging realms, a female community establishes, which alleviates their suffering from the abuse they receive by male characters, particularly Esteban. Tyson states that the promotion of sisterhood is a psychological "bonding among women based on the recognition of common experiences and goals" (101). The experience women share is the suffering they receive in patriarchal oppression as well as their engagement and connection to the merging realms. For instance, the sisterhood between Clara and the Mora sisters would not exist without the application of the merging realms. The Mora sisters first interact with Clara through telepathic contact. When the three "translucent" ladies arrive at Clara's doorstep, they "looked at each other, recognized each other, smiled at each other," and "it was the beginning of a passionate spiritual friendship that was to last the remainder of their lives and, if their predictions have come true, must still be flourishing in the Hereafter" (*Spirits* 139). This example illustrates an instant connection between women, whether they are living or if they are spirits from the merging realms.

Furthermore, the Mora sisters are empowered beyond the constraints of patriarchal oppressions as they can choose which realm they want to participate in, the

realm of the spirits, or the realm of the living. Allende writes that the Mora sisters “possessed irrefutable proof that souls can take on physical form” (*Spirits* 139). This suggests that the Mora sisters can choose whether they want to be in the physical or spiritual form. Though the physical realm is harsh due to patriarchal control, they choose to remain in that realm to support Clara. Allende further promotes the sisterhood community through the sisterhood shared community; a community her male characters typically do not partake. Even the most compassionate man, such as Nicholas, who “tried in vain to imitate” his mother’s “psychic talents,” fails to engage with the merging realms (*Spirits* 244). Nicholas fails not because he is not willing, but because he cannot experience the patriarchal oppression that bonds the sisterhood community.

In addition to using the merging realms to create a sisterhood, Allende uses the merging realms to facilitate women’s independence from dominant male figures. The independence that the female characters seek becomes the common goal within the female community. Clara, for example, accomplishes this goal when Esteban realizes that she “did not belong to him and that if she continued living in a world of apparitions, three legged tables that moved of their own volition, and cards that spelled out the future, she probably never would” (*Spirits* 107). In this sense, Clara authorizes her own decisions by refusing to acknowledge her husband or behave in the way Esteban demands. As Clara participates more with the merging realms, she cooperates less as an obedient housewife, and she strives harder to achieve the goal of gaining independence.

While the merging realms facilitate a shared community predominantly by women, it occasionally acts as a source of comfort and safety for anyone who is oppressed, including some of Allende’s male characters. For example, in the first half of

the novel, Esteban has no desire to engage with the merging realms for two reasons. First, he does not need to seek a source of comfort and safety because he is not oppressed and tells his son that engaging with spirits is not “suitable for men” (*Spirits* 244). When Clara disconnects from the merging realms for a short time at Tres Marias, Esteban says that “she seemed to have been cured for her habit of speaking with the invisible spirits and moving the furniture by supernatural means” (*Spirits* 117). Esteban refers to Clara as “cured” as if Clara’s engagement with the merging realms is a form of illness. However, Allende portrays Esteban as hypocritical because he engages with the merging realms when he becomes thoroughly oppressed. Like the oppressed women, Esteban seeks the same source of comfort and safety from Clara’s spirit in the merging realms after she dies. Esteban attempts to summon her in his miserable, lonely nights and spies on her as she glides “through the sitting room” (*Spirits* 439). Allende allows both males and females to seek comfort and safety from the spirits in the merging realms. However, more women utilize the merging realms for comfort and safety because women are the predominant oppressed people in Allende’s novel and Latin American culture.

The merging realms are ubiquitous in Allende’s novel because she believes in power in spirits. In the interview, “‘Something Magic in the Storytelling’: An interview with Isabel Allende,” by Jan Goggans, Allende expresses her beliefs in the spiritual world. Allende says, “For me, [the spiritual world is] a very safe place. That’s the place where stories come from. That’s the place of love,” and that “the spiritual world is a place where there is not good or evil” (Goggans 131). The merging realms are a sacred place not only for Allende but for many of her oppressed characters.

The Disruption of Time, Space, and Identity

Another characteristic Faris attributes as magic realism is the disruption of “time, space, and identity.” The disruption of time and space is when the author portrays time and space in an unfamiliar way. The disruption of identity, in Faris’s words, is a “mysterious sense of fluid identities and interconnectedness” (*Ordinary Enchantments* 25). Fluidness means that the character’s identities become ambiguous and multivocal. Just like the irreducible element, the disruption of time, space, and identity stand in place to represent more significant connotations. While Allende demonstrates in her novel how patriarchal societies in Latin America position women, Allende empowers her female characters by disrupting time, space, and identity.

Allende disrupts the sense of time and space, primarily with her female characters, to demonstrate how women in Latin America experience time, which is a controlled agenda by men. Allende exaggerates a woman’s experience as seen with Clara, whose entire life appears to be a disruption of time and space. As a child, Clara wanders through her parent’s mansion disconnected from a familiar representation of time to the readers. Inside the walls of the mansion, time passes differently than it does on the outside of the mansion. Allende writes:

It was a world in which time was not marked by calendars or watches and objects had a life of their own, which the apparitions sat at the table and conversed with human beings, the past and the future formed part of a single unit, and the reality of the present was a kaleidoscope of jumbled mirrors where everything, and anything could happen...Clara lived in a universe of her own inventions, protected from life’s inclement weather, where the prosaic truth of material

objects mingled with the tumultuous reality of dreams and the laws of physics and objects did not always apply. (*Spirits* 92)

In this passage, the disruption of time and space occur. The apparitions from the merging realms that “converse with human beings” represent the disruption of space. The fact that nothing is “marked by calendars or watches,” and the present reality is a “kaleidoscope of jumbled mirrors,” represents the disruption of time. Allende mocks the structures of patriarchal societies by allowing the disruption of time and space to occur within the mansions because the mansion is the site of domestication. Clara spends more time engaging with the merging realms than she does performing her domestic duties. The disruptions of time and space continuously occur throughout Allende’s novel, where many events are not marked with a beginning or an end. The “jumbled mirrors” illustrate the imagery of no beginning or end from one event to another; like a house of mirrors at an amusement park, the multitude reflections make it is difficult to determine where one thing ends, and another begins.

Allende’s depiction of disrupted time and space alludes to the hectic daily life for women in Latin America. She writes in her memoir, *My Invented Country*:

I was a typical Chilean wife, selfless and servile as a geisha... I had three jobs, I ran the house, I looked after the children, and I ran like marathoner the whole day to fight my way through the pile of responsibilities that had fallen on me, including a daily visit to my grandfather, but at night I waited for my husband with the olive for his martini between my teeth and the clothing he would wear the next morning carefully laid out. In any free moment, I shined his shoes and cut his hair and fingernails. (124)

Allende expresses her chaotic life as a young wife in Latin America, where during the days, one event transitioned to another without a moment of rest. The way Allende experienced being a wife in Latin America is similar to Clara's experience of time described by the imagery of "jumbled mirrors," where nothing marks the beginning or the end from one event to another. In contrast to Allende's life, where the men made her life chaotic, Allende allows Clara to make her husband's life chaotic. Now, Allende disrupts the typical identity of women because it is the women causing the disruption of time rather than the men. Furthermore, Allende disrupts the identity of women by not allowing Clara to partake in the typical role of a housewife that Allende did when she first married. Férula affirms Clara's lack of ability to be a housewife and realizes that "Clara was incompetent when it came to the simplest domestic tasks" (*Spirits* 105). Férula realizes that Clara "would be incapable of administrating the mansion [Férula's] brother was constructing and would need a lot of help" (*Spirits* 106). As a result, the disruption of time and space perpetuates the disruption of the typical Latin American woman's identity; an identity Allende does not condone.

Allende uses the disruption of space to demonstrate how her female characters maintain a subtle implication of power in their husband's homes. For example, Clara's implication of power becomes evident when she marries Esteban, and she disrupts the space inside his mansion. At first, Allende illustrates Esteban's mansion with familiar detail and imagery. Esteban constructs his mansion "like the new palaces of North America and Europe," where he would "hear nothing of three courtyards, corridors, rusty fountains, dark rooms, walls of whitewashed adobe, or dusty tiles on the roof"

(*Spirits* 104). However, after Clara moves into the mansion, the disruption of space occurs. Allende writes:

[The mansion] would end up full of protuberances and incrustations, of twisted staircases that led to empty spaces, of turrets, of small windows that could not be opened, doors hanging in midair, crooked hallways, and portholes that linked the living quarters so that people could communicate during the siestas, all of which were Clara's inspirations. (*Spirits* 105)

The alteration of Esteban's property, merely by the emergence of Clara's inspirations, illustrates that Clara has more power in their marriage than Esteban would like her to have. Furthermore, Esteban can do nothing to stop Clara because the power of her inspirations is more potent than his demands. In this sense, Allende symbolizes the power of women's inspirations within Latin America, which are just as durable as male dominance.

In contrast to Clara, who challenges the typical identity of Latin American women, Férula assimilates the typical identity of Latin American women. Though Férula feels enslaved to domesticity, she remains devoted to that position. Allende writes that Férula is a woman of "proven spirit [and] self-sacrifice" (*Spirits* 106), and she spends years caring for her sick mother, "an old lady who was slowly, irremediably rotting alive" (*Spirits* 109). Férula, however, does not choose this lifestyle; instead, her brother Esteban forces her into this lifestyle. Though Esteban continues supporting his sister and mother financially, he abandons them in other vital aspects, such as emotionally. After Férula devotes years to her mother, she comes to be a lonely "spinster," full of anger. During the time of her mother's death, she now "had to suffer with the torment of her mother not

recognizing her and calling day and night for her son Esteban” (*Spirits* 80). Férula is a prime example of how women identify in the family within Latin America. Allende writes in her memoir that “Chilean women tend to accept – though not forgive – abandonment by their men because they think it is an endemic ill, something inherited in the male nature” (52). Férula accepts that Esteban abandons them and dedicates her entire life to nursing her mother. However, it leaves her isolated and lonely for many years. She never forgives Esteban for abandoning her with this menial task.

In contrast to Férula, Allende challenges the oppressed female identity in Latin American by establishing Tránsito Soto as one of her most compelling characters. Like Clara, Tránsito Soto disrupts the typical identity of Latin American women. Tránsito Soto enters the novel as a young girl and prostitute, whom Esteban visits frequently. Allende writes that she had the “Tibetan gift of placing her skinny adolescent frame in her client’s hands and transporting her soul to a distant place” (77). As Allende begins to establish Tránsito Soto’s identity, Allende simultaneously incorporates the disruption of space. For example, Tránsito Soto’s soul travels to a distant place where it can remain untainted by the hands of men. The disruption of Tránsito Soto’s identity appears when she states that one day, she knows she will be “rich and famous” (*Spirits* 77). Years later, Tránsito finds her way to the capital and begins gaining respect and power throughout the city. Tránsito explains to Esteban, when they interact years later, still as a prostitute:

No one’s ever supported me and that’s why you’ll never find me supporting someone else. I work for myself, and whatever I earn, I spend as I see fit. It’s been a struggle, believe me – don’t think I’ve had an easy time of it, because the

madams of these places don't like to deal with women. They prefer pimps. They don't help you out. They have no consideration. (*Spirits* 130)

By the end of the novel, Tránsito Soto is the owner of a brothel and maintains a position of power within the city, though her profession camouflages it. In this sense, Allende implies that women do the best as they can in a patriarchal society. Though Tránsito Soto remains in the prostitution profession, she surpasses the restrictions of a patriarchal society because politicians and military officers visit her business. She now serves the elites of society, in turn, disrupting the identity of her position in society.

Allende uses the disruption of time and space to empower her female characters to resist the patriarchal society in which they live. Furthermore, Allende's connection with an alternate space is as much a part of her novel as it is in her everyday life. Allende says in Goggans's interview:

There is something magic in the storytelling. You tap into another world. The story becomes whole when you tap into the collective story, when other people's stories become part of the writing, and you know that it's not your story only. I have a feeling that I don't invent anything. That somehow, I discover things that are in another dimension. That they are already there, and my job is to find them and bring them into the page. But I don't make them up. (129)

Allende believes in the disruption of space not only in her writing but in her everyday life. She acknowledges the many other identities while she engages with alternate spaces. In this sense, Allende's writing represents the voice of those who cannot project their voice. Allende taps into these other spaces and shares her experiences through her writing, which makes her story a testimony for unheard voices.

The Phenomenal World

Another term Faris uses to describe magic realism is the “phenomenal world.” While the irreducible elements elaborate the magic in magical realism, the phenomenal world elaborates the realism in magic realism. Faris states that “realistic descriptions create a fictional world that resembles the one we live in” (14). The phenomenal world is the correspondence between the times and places within the novel to the existential times and places of the “real world” – the world of which the readers exist. Linda Gould Levine, author of Isabel Allende’s autobiography, states in her article, “Weaving Life into Fiction,” that Allende’s storytelling is a “rich imagination and social testimony” that revolves around the subjects of Latin American politics and feminism (19). Allende further explains in an interview with Inés Dölz-Blackburn et al. that she incorporates the realistic elements of the world that have marked her life in her novel. Allende says, “I write about the things I care for...love, historic events, social issues, women’s issues, ecology, [and] peace” (Dölz-Blackburn et al. 93). Allende illustrates the phenomenal world by illustrating realistic details to represent both feminist and political matters that have occurred historically within Chile.

Allende’s first representation of the phenomenal world alludes to the time and locations of her novel, which she positions in Chile beginning in the first half of the 20th century. The readers are aware that the setting of Allende’s novel is in Chile due to Allende’s subtle descriptions of the landscape. For example, Esteban goes to rebuild his family’s land, Tres Marias, “outside the town of San Lucas,” a town in the far south of Chile (*Spirits* 54). Allende describes San Lucas just as it appears in ‘reality’ that wherever Esteban looks, “all he saw were rocks, thick underbrush, and mountains”

(*Spirits* 54-55). Allende also incorporates settings beyond the borders of Chile explored by Clara's uncle Marcos, which he shares in stories. Allende writes:

[Clara] knew by heart words from several dialects of the Indians, and could describe the exact way in which they pierced their lips and earlobes with wood shafts, their initiation rites, the names of most poisonous snakes, and the appropriate antidotes for each...she recalled Lope de Aguirre's [a historical Spanish conquistador] search for El Dorado...the flora and fauna her extraordinary uncle had seen...the lamas who take salt tea with yak lard...the description of the opulent women of Tahiti, the rice fields of China, [and] the white prairies of the North, where eternal ice kills animals and men.... (*Spirits* 19)

The naming of once-living historical figures, the illustration of cultural traditions and practices, and the description of various parts of the world, all indicate that the setting of the novel is a representation of the existential world. Unlike the irreducible elements, readers can relate to the realistic details of the various settings within the novel, which is vital for Allende because this operates as a process of establishing a reliable narrative. Not only is Allende's narrative becoming reliable, but it is also becoming credible. The establishment of Allende's voice as both reliable and credible in turn establishes her voice as plausible when she presents more significant concerns regarding feminist and political matters.

Allende's most significant representations of the phenomenal world are the inclusion of feminist movements within Chile. Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney discusses in her essay, "On the 'F'-Word as Insult and on Feminism as Political Practice: Women's Mobilization for Rights in Chile," feminist movements in Chile during the 20th century.

Mooney states that in the first decades of the 20th century, “many Chilean female activists prioritized political participation in service of the improvement of family and community life” (124). Nívea, Allende’s most passionate and determined character for women’s rights and equality, represents the activists who sought political participation amid their domestic duties in their husband’s homes. Nívea hopes that her husband will win a seat in Congress so she can “secure the vote for women” (*Spirits* 3). Allende writes:

[Nívea] would chain herself with other ladies to the gates of Congress and the Supreme Court, setting off a degrading spectacle that made all their husbands look ridiculous. He knew that Nívea went out at night to hang suffragette posters on walls across the city and that she was capable of walking through the heart of the city in the plain light of day...calling for women to have equal rights with men, to be allowed to vote and attend the university.... (*Spirits* 75)

However, Nívea does not break away from her duties as a mother when she starts her political campaign. Mooney states that “Women, as mothers, often expanded the realm of the involvement in politics by accepting multiple tasks outside the home, but in this capacity, they did not eradicate the restrictive effects of the Chilean patriarchy of the time” (125). For this reason, Nívea fails in eradicating the restrictive holds on women in politics. Allende illustrates this failure when men accuse Nívea as “sick in the head” and that it “would be to go against nature” to allow women to pursue educations and professions such as medical doctors (*Spirits* 75). When Nívea dies from an accidental decapitation, Allende continues to illustrate ridicules women receive by men. She writes, “[Nívea] enemies said of her that if she had lost her head during her lifetime, there was

no reason why she should find it in death” (*Spirits* 135). Nívea’s death symbolizes women’s failed attempts in pursuance of gender equality within Chile. Allende states in the interview with Dölz-Blackburn et al., “The first thing that women have to do, is to stay in their house and be quiet” (101). In contrast to this cultural belief, Allende portrays Nívea as the “first feminist in the country” (*Spirits* 135), as she initiates the defiance of silence in a patriarchal society.

Another indication of the phenomenal world is Allende’s representation of existential Chilean political and literary figures. The first representation is the “Poet,” which refers to the famous Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, a family friend and inspiration to Allende with her writing. Allende illustrates her admiration for the Poet when her character Clara declaims, “the beautiful verses of a young poet she had taken under her wing – a poet who was beginning to be talked about everywhere” (*Spirits* 160).

Allende illustrates how influential the Poet's poetry is when Blanca gives her future husband, Count Jean de Satory, a book of poems that symbolizes Pablo Neruda's poetry. The Count memorizes the Poet’s lines and recites them perfectly. The Count says, “it was the best poetry ever written, and that even in French, the language of the arts, there was nothing to compare to it” (*Spirits* 217). In this scene, Allende also alludes to the emotional affect Pablo Neruda's poetry has on people.

Allende draws on Neruda’s poetry because he illustrates much of the suffering Chilean citizens endured during the coup and while many were in exile. Allende refers to one of the Neruda’s poems, “Exile,” from his book *Cantos ceremonials*, in her memoir, *My Invented Country*:

There are exiles that gnaw and others

that are like consuming fire.
 There is heartache for the murdered country
 that rises from below
 from feet and from roots
 and suddenly the man is suffocating,
 he no longer knows corn tassels,
 the guitar has been silenced,
 there is no air for that mouth
 he can't live without a land,
 and then he falls to his knees
 not onto native soil, but into death. (165)

The imagery in this poem represents the suffering that the Pablo Neruda, Allende, and all other Chilean's in exile suffered during the regime. Neruda says, "He can't live without a land," alluding to his separation while in exile. Allende, also separated from her land while in exile, affirms the anxiety of separation from Chile and says, "I feel guilty for having abandoned my country" (*Invented Country* 164). Allende's and Pablo Neruda's loyalty is an essential theme in their works, which is the motive for Allende's portrayal of the phenomenal world in her novel.

The second existential figure Allende incorporates is the "Candidate," who represents President Salvador Allende, the historical Chilean president that General Augusto Pinochet overthrew during the military coup of 1973. In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende addresses the dispute as to whether the coup assassinated the president or if he committed suicide. She states in her memoir, *Paula*, that "the official version is that

[President] Allende placed the barrel of the rifle beneath his chin, pulled the trigger, and blew off his head” (195). However, Allende counters that statement in her novel and writes, “word spread that the president had died, and no one believed the official version that he had committed suicide” (373). Allende uses her position as an author to vindicate her belief that the leaders of the coup assassinated the president. In the novel when the military coup attacks Palacio de La, everybody hides on the floor except the president, who remains “on his feet” (*Spirits* 370). When a man tries to pull the president away from the window from where he fires a bazooka, he “replied with a curse and remained erect” (*Spirits* 370). Again, Allende takes advantage of her position as a writer and illustrates that the president died with honor.

However, Allende shows the consequences of loyalty to President Allende during the time of the coup through her character Jaime, Clara’s son. The military leaders of the coup ask Jaime to broadcast on television that the president was drunk and committed suicide. However, Jaime tells the military to “do it yourself” (*Spirits* 370). For this, Jaime is “beat, stripped from his clothes, tied at the hands and feet with barbed wire, starved from food and water for days in his excrements and blood, and then shot and dynamited to death” (*Spirits* 371). The consequences for Jaime’s loyalty to the president emphasizes why Allende, as a loyalist to President Allende, chooses to use the pseudonym the Candidate rather than explicitly using his name in her novel.

Through Allende’s depictions of the coup, she reveals the injustices that occurred in her country, which supports the element of the phenomenal world in magic realism. Earle says, “Ethically, [Allende] wanted to bear witness to the social injustice, political violence, and repression – having been motivated by the betrayal and murder by right-

wing conspirators of an uncle on her fathers' side, President Salvador, Allende" (173). While Allende appeals to the injustices to President Allende, she also illustrates the injustices that many people suffered from during the military coup through another symbolic character – the Dictator.

Allende's novel testifies to the brutality and torture that many Chilean victims suffered during the Pinochet regime. The "Dictator" represents the oppressive and tyrannical military leader General Augusto Pinochet, who overthrew President Salvador Allende. Patricio Navia states in her article, "Pinochet: The Father of Contemporary Chile," that Pinochet is known for his rule and "massive human rights violations against political opponents" (250). Allende explains in *My Invented Country* that, during the time of the Pinochet regime, the country became "divided between those who backed the military government and those who opposed it" (160). Allende illustrates that division through her characters such as Esteban, who desires to see the president's term overthrown, and Alba, who supports the president.

Allende exposes the injustices that have occurred in Chile. Allende says that "the acts of the military regime will go unpunished, but they can no longer be hidden or ignored" (*Invented Country* 161). For example, the military leaders of the coup force Jaime to lay on the ground where a "tank snorted past, four inches from their heads, amidst the hard laughter of the soldiers" (*Spirits* 370). Furthermore, Allende writes:

They made [Jaime] walk in a squatting position, as if he were in a trench, and led him into an enormous room filled with naked men who had been tied up in lines of ten, their hands bound behind their backs, so badly beaten they could hardly stand. Rivulets of blood were running down onto the marble floor. (*Spirits* 411)

Jaime's niece, Alba, also undergoes torture. The leaders of the military coup force Alba to watch vehicles run over men's heads. Members of the military coup rape her, cut her fingers off, and plunge her head "into a bucket of excrement until she fainted from disgust" (*Spirits* 411). The grotesque imagery exposes the suffering that occurred during the regime as Pinochet was the "intransigent father, capable of imposing strict discipline," in Chile (*My Invented Country* 167).

Allende's experiences during the regime suggest her fictional illustrations of the military crimes as truth. Michael Moody explains in his article, "Isabel Allende and the Testimonial Novel," that Allende worked as a journalist during the regime and documented the "personal stories of many who had been imprisoned and tortured" (39). Allende's representation of Pinochet allows her to portray the suffering people have endured under political oppression. Allende's choice to represent Pinochet as the "Dictator" reveals how Pinochet instilled fear into all the citizens of Chile that Allende chooses not to acknowledge him by name.

Allende represents the phenomenal world through her representation of the existential world in Chile. Allende says that, as a writer, she is lucky to "preserve the hidden memory that is not in the textbooks" (Dölz-Blackburn, Inés, et al. 93). She explains that her literature takes the point of view from the people who have suffered, and history is more than battles won and battles lost, but it is about suffering, which are themes she represents in her novels. The application of the phenomenal world is crucial because it forces the readers to remember that, amid the irreducible elements and the merging realms, the portrayal of patriarchal and political oppression exists in Allende's novel as much in Latin America.

The Unsettling Doubt

Faris's final characteristic of magic realism is the "unsettling doubt." Faris explains that the unsettling doubt is how readers react toward the elements of magic realism, primarily the irreducible elements and the merging realms. Faris says, "before categorizing the irreducible element as irreducible, the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubt" (*Ordinary Enchantments* 17). An example of when a reader may experience some unsettling doubt is when they discover Clara's ability to move objects without touching them. For instance, Clara moves the saltcellar during dinner without touching it as there is "no sign of illusionist's trick" (*Spirits* 8). Momentarily, the reader may doubt what they just read because Clara's ability to move objects without touching them is not familiar to the reader's everyday life. However, while the reader experiences some unsettling doubt, the characters or Allende's narration guide the reader to accept the abnormal events as normal. Evidence of acceptance is when Nívea pulls Clara's braids to "wake her daughter from her mad distraction and return the saltcellar to immobility" (*Spirits* 8). Nívea's lack of surprise toward the moving saltcellar invites the readers to accept the unusual event because it is typical in the characters' lives. Since the characters do not experience moments of unsettling doubt, the reader's moment of unsettling doubt does not last long. Throughout the novel, Allende acclimates her readers to the things that cause unsettling doubts as possible. Therefore, the readers come to accept more critical themes as possible, such as her feminist visions regarding patriarchal oppression.

Readers experience some unsettling doubt when they encounter the irreducible element because the irreducible element goes unexplained in the narrative. Allende does

not offer explanations because she wants the readers to focus on the message the irreducible element portrays and not the irreducible element itself. In the book *Patriarchy and Power in Magical Realism*, Maryam Ebadi Asayesh discusses what other critics have said regarding the irreducible element. Asayesh quotes the critic Amaryll Chanady that the “attempt to analyze the perspectives that differ from our normal view of reality [e.g., the irreducible elements] would only draw our attention to the strangeness or even impossibility of certain events and beliefs” (57). For example, when Rosa the Beautiful is born, she is “white and smooth, without a wrinkle, like a porcelain doll with green hair and yellow eyes—the most beautiful creature to be born on earth since the days of original sin” (*Spirits* 4). Nivea immediately accepts her child’s abnormal appearances. Nivea knew “even before [Rosa] was born...she was not of this world,” therefore, “she had not been surprised” (*Spirits* 4).

Allende does not offer any explanation for Rosa’s strange appearances at birth, and merely encourages the readers to accept Rosa’s strange beauty by portraying Nivea as calm. Allende does not explain why Rosa possesses a skin tone of “soft bluish lights” (*Spirits* 5), or why her hair is green, because an explanation would draw more attention toward the strangeness of her unique beauty, rather than what her unique beauty symbolizes. How men react to Rosa’s strange beauty illustrates how men view women in a patriarchal society. Rosa hypnotizes men, including Esteban, where they stare with their “noses pressed against the window” (*Spirits* 25). In this scene, Allende exposes that men value women based on what they see on the surface. The men do not show any other interest in Rosa unless it revolves around her unique beauty. However, Rosa flouts the

way men perceive her, and though she has scores of suitors, she shows no desire or interest in any of them. In turn, Rosa illustrates a desire for independence from men.

Another element that causes unsettling doubt to the readers is the merging realms. One reason why Allende does not offer an explanation when the merging realms occur is that the merging realms are a realistic element in Allende's life. In Goggans' interview, Allende says, "In these twelve years that I have been writing, things have happened in my life and in my writing that prove to me that there is another world" (129). Furthermore, when Allende writes, she surrounds herself by the photos of her deceased family members, such as her grandmother, mother, and daughter, inviting their spirits so they may assist her as she writes her stories (Goggans 13). The merging realms exist in Allende's life as much as they exist in her novel. In both, they offer security and protection.

Furthermore, Allende explains in her memoir *Paula* that when her grandmother died, she believed her spirit remained in the curtains (26). For this reason, as a child, Allende played in the curtains often so she would remain close to her grandmother. Allende affirms that the spirits help, accompany, and protect her, which is what the spirits attempt to do during Clara's wedding celebration. However, Clara is "completely oblivious to the warnings of the spirits that gestured desperately at her from the curtains" (*Spirits* 101). Allende does not explain how or why the ghosts live in the curtains because how the spirits serve as a protective force to her female characters is more important.

Allende may not find the need to explain the occurrences that cause some unsettling doubt because the things that initiate doubt are naturally a part of Latin American culture. Faris states that "some readers in some cultures will hesitate less than

others, depending on the beliefs and narrative traditions,” because beliefs and perceptions of reality and magic vary per culture (*Ordinary Enchantments* 17). According to Allende’s interviews, the irreducible element and the merging realms are a part of Allende’s culture as well as the culture in Latin America. Allende says in an interview with Dölz-Blackburn et al. that Alejo Carpentier recognized that while Europe attempted to create magic realism in literature, it was already present in Latin American culture. Allende says, “[Carpentier] abandoned the surrealists and searched in [Latin American] roots, in our history, in our legends, [and] in our folklore” (qtd. in Dölz-Blackburn et al. 102). Allende does not incorporate the elements of magic realism for the sake of an interesting story plot, but because the elements are a part of her culture.

The most crucial aspect to bear in mind while reading a story of magic realism is not to consider the elements that cause the reader to hesitate as anything rather than fact; otherwise, the readers will fail to recognize what they represent. Faris states that “the contemporary Western reader’s primary doubt is most often between understanding an event as a character’s dream or hallucination and, alternatively, understanding it as a miracle” (17). Allende’s “ghosts dancing in curtains” are not a hallucination (101); the spirits “hovering” around Clara’s head are not a dream (84); Clara’s mythlike dog, Barrabás, with “crocodile teeth” and a “hoof” for a paw are not imaginary (22). The unsettling doubt relates to the themes of patriarchal and political oppression in the sense that Allende uses the irreducible elements, the merging realms, and the disruption of time and space to convey her feminist visions as possible. However, Allende cannot waste time explaining how or why these elements occur because it would deter her readers from recognizing what the elements represent.

Conclusion

Magic realism allows writers to convey truths, and it allows readers to perceive truths. Allende employs Faris's five elements of magic realism to portray truths regarding political and patriarchal oppression in Latin America in her novel *The House of the Spirits*. The irreducible elements assist Allende as she exposes the constructs of a patriarchal society, in turn, mocking that society. The merging realms act as a source of protection while enhancing the female community in a patriarchal society. The disruption of time, space, and identity corresponds to the multivocal identity of women in Latin America. The phenomenal world alludes to the existential place, Chile, and the suffering that occurred during the Pinochet regime. Finally, the unsettling doubt is the technique Allende uses to guide her readers to accept the events in her novel as truths, as well as her feminist visions toward patriarchal societies. Allende utilizes magic realism to expose truths in Latin America, where patriarchal and political oppression has persisted for centuries. As a female author, in a country where women's voices are limited, Allende employs magic realism to unfold her feminist visions and dreams.

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