

Exploring Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*: Foucauldian Perspective on Power

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Abstract: Power is a crucial phenomenon which influences almost everything around. Micheal Foucault, a French philosopher, opined that power exists everywhere and it works most of the times in disciplinary forms. The present study deals with Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* regarding the portrayal of power analyzed from Foucauldian Perspective. The novel is the story of class, politics and family struggles. All the actions and motifs in the novel are affected by class structure. This class also has devastating control on the poor people of the society and peasants who have little access to business and politics. The study employs Foucault's theory of disciplinary power which refers to a systematic exercise of power in modern societies through surveillance, control, and regulation.

Keywords: Disciplinary Power, Foucauldian perspective, Latin-America, Hegemony

Background of the Study

Politicians, institutions, and individuals worldwide, particularly in developing countries, have consistently employed various strategies to gain and consolidate power, often using this power to assert influence over others in pursuit of their personal or collective goals. This phenomenon, extensively discussed by social scientists and critics, also features prominently in literature, where writers reflect on the dynamics of power in fictional narratives (Echevarria, *Modern Latin American Literature: An Introduction*, p. 67). Power-related themes have been explored by numerous social theorists, from Machiavelli (*The Prince*) to John Gaventa (*Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*), who have developed frameworks and concepts to understand its functioning. One of the most influential thinkers on power is Michel Foucault, who argues that "a society without power relations can only be an abstraction" (*Foucault's The Subject and Power*, p. 208). According to Foucault, social structures and hierarchies provide the channels through which power is exercised (Elisheva, *Empowerment and Community Planning: Theory and Practice of People-Focused Social Solutions*, p. 54).

Foucault's is of the opinion that power always exists everywhere. It is not because is cover and corrupt everything but it comes from everywhere and it can be approached from everywhere. In his view all the phenomena have its own structure for power. It may have different degree to show off. It may have various forms to note but it is very obvious that the existence of power cannot be denied even in little and short phenomena of life. He further explains that power and knowledge are interdependent on each other. One produces other and rectifies other. Powers is a multiple of forces and controls its power

spheres in different things. Foucault is not only focusing on the power that is result of multiple forces or rules. Power that exists in groups has certain sets of principles to rule or ruling. It may be called institutional power that has been exercise in many parts of the world manipulate different aims of power. He is not focusing on power that has been subject of debate over the years. In his views power is separate phenomena omnipresent in its own shape and always has its own separate form and shape. In his views power works everywhere and it is present in very minute things. It is put into practice by everyone having its own short terms aims and objects. It is not always confined to the powerful and weak. It is not always restricted to rulers and ruled rather it is present in every object and every individual but different is form and degree. In these views, he wants to prove that society is combined with different structures having power that ultimately form overall power structures. It is not short and restricted rather it is the combination of different power forces working together to manipulate different institutions.

He is of the opinion that power always has its own resistance. He explains “where there is power, there is always resistance. Resistance is never exterior to power” (French History and Philosophy, 1926-1984). He says that power always has its own resistance. There are not any exterior phenomena to oppose power. It is matter of every object that occupies power. There is no external relation that could indicate power. Power is something that always has its own origin and resistance against this origin is very much present in its own existence. In the novel, *The House of the Spirits*, different social groups are combined and they are made to work for power. They ultimately change each other and work to win the favour of the most powerful. So that, they may easily put into practice their agenda. In this regard, the power and resistance against the power comes from power inside. This point is further clarified in coming chapters of the study to support the core of the study.

Foucault further explaining the power relations that power is always practiced by many points. There is no complete check on in. there are different parts and groups which exercise power rather it frames its own relationships in the society to further mobilize their agenda. There is one clear and ultimate point that is regarded the responsible of excising power. He stresses that even less and weaker numbers or groups have power that they put into to practice to stop the ultimate and show some kind of resistance. Foucault adds that “relations of power are immanent in other types of relations” (net). He wants to say that power have relations with other power structures. It paves its ways to reach the ultimate power. It is present in all relations.

Every relation is governing by power and further strengthens up by power. It has an easy access to other relation to exercise power in collaboration. In Foucault’s concept of power there is no binary opposition in power groups. There is no division of stronger and weaker sides rather power comes from weaker side and overturn the system hegemony and occupation. Resistance is shown by weaker and this resistance is always term as power. So, for exercising power, there is no need of a strong and huge opposition, even weaker side of the society possess power and use it time to prove its presence. There are no outer connections to this power. Groups and objects exist inside the power. There is no outer division of power.

Discourse is always instrument of power and that is used to show it. It can undermine and oppose power. Sometime their discourse is used to produce power. Power is always something that can be produced and opposed with the help of power discourse. Discourse is used to show power and oppose it. It is an instrument stronger than silence. It is short and a much-minimized form of power but cannot be excluded from the overall sphere of power. It is said in previous paragraphs that power comes from little and minimized groups so, taking this into account discourse cannot be ignored in this regard. Other than discourse there are other system of governance and ruling which are regarded as the instruments of power and strength. These elements can exist on either side, weaker and stronger but always guaranteeing the existence of power. So, any kind of power and any kind of resistance is part of the overall power structuration. This structure can work in collaboration with other system and always has some inter dependent and interrelation called disciplinary power. This disciplinary power can exist and

work beyond any limit and boundary in a society or a system of governance. This kind of relation and system of government is very much present in Latin America. Over the years, it has been filled with practice military and civilian power in Latin America. Sometime dictators find it easy way to access the throne and sometime it was easy for civilian to overpower the country. In most of the time it has also been noticed that both military and civilian form a collusion of government of rule the country but all were working and struggling to get power and then by exercising it to get control over the country. All the time this power has been playing see saw and different power groups remained active to frame different collusion to get control. The Present study discusses Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* which portrays this class system wakening the society. In the novel, the elite upper class has strong relationships with landowners and they try to subjugate the lower or working class. The novel is an ample proof of the power struggles among different classes of the society and analyzed in the concept of Disciplinary Power in coming chapters.

Research Objectives

To discuss disciplinary power from Foucauldian Perspective in the selected novel

To explore power of hegemony in the novel

Analysis and Discussion

This study aims to examine the role of disciplinary power, which operates through a comprehensive framework and subtly infiltrates society, as portrayed in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. Allende, a prominent Latin American author, seeks to uncover the complexities of power dynamics that have shaped Latin American history over the centuries. Throughout this region, various power structures have exerted influence over nearly every aspect of life. These structures encompass a range of groups, including those associated with political authority.

Foucauldian Disciplinary Power

Esteban Trueba, a central character in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, serves as the head of the Liberal Party and is profoundly influenced by personal desires, particularly his love for Rosa. His passion for Rosa leads him to critique the very party he leads, at one point declaring, "The Liberal Party will go to hell" (Allende, 10). This statement reflects both his personal entanglement and the extent of his power, which allows him to disregard the party's objectives. As a prominent leader, Trueba abuses his authority, prioritizing personal desires over political commitments. His actions align with the concept of will power discussed by political theorist Robert Dahl, as Trueba's personal inclinations supersede the structured goals of his political role. His will power dictates his choices, allowing him to dismiss the party's ideals in favor of personal agendas.

In contrast, the power dynamics of the conservative political structure, especially in Latin America during the time of the novel, are also explored. Conservative forces exert a significant influence over both the political landscape and the social order. The conservative party, led by Rosa's father, exemplifies a rigid and hierarchical power system that ensures the domination of its leaders. Rosa's father, an influential conservative figure, maintains control over the social and political spheres, often using his authority to suppress opposition and subordinates. This power structure is reinforced by fear and respect for his dominance, and even Esteban Trueba, when seeking Rosa's hand in marriage, finds himself unable to express his intentions freely due to the oppressive influence of Rosa's father. Trueba's inability to articulate his thoughts when approaching Rosa's household—"the day I entered her house and was within speaking range of her, I couldn't think of anything to say" (Allende, 26)—demonstrates the disciplinary power at play, which constrains individual expression and aligns with the theories of Antonio Gramsci, who posits that power structures subjugate individuals, preventing them from challenging established norms.

In the broader context of Latin America, political, economic, and religious powers have historically

collaborated to maintain control over the subordinate classes. These systems of power were initially imposed by dictators and later solidified as societal norms, ensuring the subordination of the working class. This pattern of domination is evident throughout the novel, where various characters, including priests, generals, and political leaders, engage in a system of power that is marked by brutality and oppression. Particularly during the era of dictatorship, this system of power was designed to keep subordinates under control, ensuring that no opposing forces could challenge the status quo. These power structures are depicted as interwoven and self-reinforcing, with leaders such as Trueba using wealth and political influence to assert their dominance over society.

Michel Foucault's theory of power, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of various social structures, offers an insightful framework for understanding the power dynamics in *The House of the Spirits*. Foucault argues that power is not exercised in isolation but operates through a network of relationships, institutions, and systems. In the novel, characters like Clara, who possesses supernatural abilities, interact with these power structures in ways that reveal the complexities of power in society. Clara's psychic abilities, which allow her to predict death and other misfortunes, function within a broader network of social and supernatural forces. Her predictions, often tinged with violence, illustrate the intersection of personal power and the collective social structure. In this sense, power is not only an institutional force but also a metaphysical one, as Clara's actions are influenced by and, in turn, influence the fate of her family.

The Del Valle family, through Clara's supernatural foresight, embodies the consequences of living within a tightly controlled power structure. Clara's knowledge of future events, such as the deaths of family members, highlights the interplay between personal and societal forces. The family's tragic fate is not solely the result of their actions but is also shaped by larger, uncontrollable systems of power. This connection between personal agency and social structures reflects Foucault's assertion that power operates through various mechanisms, both visible and invisible, that affect individuals' lives in profound ways.

Wealth, as another significant aspect of power in the novel, is also a tool for social mobility and control. Esteban Trueba's pursuit of wealth, a crucial element for asserting power in Latin American society, reflects the deep connection between economic status and political influence. In a society where wealth is a symbol of power, Trueba's rise from poverty to affluence is portrayed as a means of gaining prestige and social control. His desire to accumulate wealth, as he believes it will allow him to secure a higher status in society—"within six months I would have enough money to get married, and by the end of the year, I would be a wealthy man" (Allende, 36)—illustrates how economic power is intertwined with personal identity and societal influence. Foucault's theory of power is evident here, as Trueba uses his newfound wealth to reshape his identity and assert control over his social environment, reflecting the broader societal norm that power and wealth are inextricably linked.

In conclusion, *The House of the Spirits* offers a rich exploration of power dynamics, both personal and societal, within the context of Latin American history. The novel portrays the complex interplay of political, economic, and supernatural forces that shape the lives of its characters. Through figures like Esteban Trueba and Clara, Allende illustrates how power is not only a tool of oppression but also a means of personal transformation and societal control, operating within a web of interconnected structures that influence every aspect of life.

Power of hegemony

In the novel there is a huge and enlarged class system. There are number of issues which are generated and created by class system. The people of upper class consider the people of lower class as their commodity and harmonized them. They show their possession on them. They were of the opinion that these poor people are created and meant to serve them. Another very important issue was the economic empowerment of classes. There are number of people who had wealth making them powerful. Wealthy

people had huge importance whereas they had everything of life. They can buy luxurious life and happy mode of living. Esteban tries his best to become wealthy and rich and tries to show the people around them that he is a wealthy man. Because of this attitude he is very much successful in winning the favor of Del Vel family. He is also considered an honorable man in the family. First they offer the hand of Rosa and after the death of Rosa he becomes successful in convincing them to get married Clara. He spends much of his time in mines too earn money and setting his status in the society. He is an important figure and he is a prominent member of socialist party. He is a huge political career. After being elected as member of the senate, he dominates everybody and decides for the future of the people of his party. He also becomes successful in establishing huge and strong relations with the military troops. After getting his relation strong with army and consider common people his property and completely put them under control. He also had strong ties with conservative party. He works hard to win election for socialist party. After winning elections, he becomes dictator in his party and shows his strong upper hand on the other people of the party. In short, everything is hegemonies and controlled by wealth. Wealth is considered as a token of respect in Latin American society. The whole society is corrupt and power works everywhere and corrupts each system and institution of the society. Esteban wants to earn enough money and sets himself a wealthy man in the society. He says that I work hard and once "I would have enough money to get married" (36). This completely shows the system of class. Esteban belong to the poor and lowest class of the society. His childhood is poverty stricken and he is always put aside in matter of society and dreams. This time he wants to have some money and gets married in Dell Vel family. He also knows better that he is poor man and belongs to lower strata of the society. So, in order to move well the targeted society he should have enough wealth. He is also will aware of the pattern and custom of Latin American society. He enters the family, as a shy man but leave them while he is well wisher of the country. All this could be possible only because he gets good wealth.

On the other hand, the situation is worst with the other lower class and sub-standard people. They always remain in one situation and unable to change the pattern of their lives. These poor people are killed, looted and set out of their house by the most powerful people of the time. They are hegemonies and set out of their lands and houses. Poor are kept poor and wealthy men are given status in their life. In the novel, there is clash between socialist, liberal and conservative parties. Mostly people who belong to socialist class are taken over by liberal party workers and other powerful forces. After winning the elections the people of military and other powerful people came in power and they outclass them and set them out. So, it is obvious that in Latin American it was usual and daily routine that people of that time were taken over by some forces and they were outclass from the society. The situation was worst with peasant their men were killed and arrested and most of the time their women were raped and nobody ever raised voice for their rights.

Raps and sexual appetites were also considered one of the most common and usual tragedy with peasants. Their children were the products of raps and they were never accepted in life neither by society not by the raps doers. They were kept under control and nobody ever took care of them only because of their relation with lower class and being poor of the country. Many girls were raped but "no man felt strong enough to spend his life protecting her from other men's desires" (286). This is the more pathetic than poverty. Many girls were considered hegemony and no one ever felt need to protect them and save them. Raps were not only a culture rather it was a complete and huge practice that was done in collaboration with some other member of a community. The history of Latin America is full of this kind of worst practices against women.

Many girls were treated as commodity in the society and they were not given due respect and they were often misused and then left alone. Nobody was ready to accept the blame of raping them. They were bearing children but not nobody ever protected them and gave them name and honor. There were also gangs in the society who were raping and looting these poor girls. No protection from the law side was ensured to these girls. The society was moving on the pattern of powerful and the most forceful people.

Many leaders and dictators were committed in this cruel act of raping these girls and putting them at disadvantages. These girls were poor and set at starve and looted. There was no economic security for them in Latin America. In order to earn and protect their rights they had to allow these looter and rapists. This entire rapist had strong collaboration with each other and they never loosened their ring around them. These poor people were unable to approach any police or law protecting agency because of their strong tie and cooperation with each other. they were considered their property and commodity and just giving few economic benefits their life and honoured was molested on large scales. They were not given mutual protection and married legally. There was no culture of marrying these poor girls. They were only considered an object of rap and sex. These rapists were considered powerful people and they had strong relation with government and powerful structures of the society. They were also having some economic prosperity and on the bases of this they were exploiting these poor girls.

Another reason for this exploitation was support and protection from the government side. Many of these rapists like Esteban Trueba were protected and supported by the government officials. Government has double standard for the protection of upper classes and lower classes. They only consider the upper class people as an object of reformation and law protected masses. There was no rules and protection for these poor class people. On the other hand these poor girls were only kept for the sex and other stereotypical aims. To them the best ever use and benefits of these poor people is only their use and exploitation. These powerful masses only appreciate them when they using them. They came to them and appreciated their beauty and then exploiting them. They were fond of beauty and “beauty struck force into their houses and hearts and they prepared to admire her from afar” (285). It is very obvious from these lines that these poor girls were considered an object of beauty and sex. After looting them and using them nobody ever ask them their right and protection. There were number of people who raped these peasant girls and they were never given any protection from state and other law in order agency because of the powerfulness of these rapists who were making conspiracies with government and working against these classes. This cruelty and inhuman treatment continued many years in Latin American until civil right protection movement started. the whole system of the society was governed by class pattern and these classes were supported and farmed by government that was mixture of civilian and military institutions. These civilians had something in common to them in their interests and benefits and in turn they only protected their benefits rather than the respect and right of civilians. All these powerful forces also had something in common. They had strong shared interests which were never put at stake by these forces. This is the concept of Michal Foucault that power works in collaboration with other powerful forces and always active to put the poor and lower class at disadvantages.

After making strong collaboration these powerful forces never compromise of their interests. They did not care for the protection of the rights of poor rather they only focused on their own agendas and interest. This is rightly termed as disciplinary power. The power that works and move on a complete agenda. Same is the case is with the Latin American society depicted in the novel. The whole system of the society is governed by these forces and they are working and moving on a complete agenda. In Latin America the economic resources were possessed by few people who had great stature and status in the society and in turn they started exploiting the poor and people of lower classes.

On the basis of these economic benefits, they made the poor and lower-class people act as they want them to do. They showed a complete and a huge interest in shaping the mind and attitudes of people. They showed complete hegemony and strong upper hold on these poor class people and then on the bases of this upper hand they started exploiting them. This poverty and low standard are deliberately created in the society and people are shown their status and then they were challenged in many ways of life. They had certain compulsions and weak points being part of a society. Their social and moral struggles for uplifting the standard of life were suppressed and they were left helpless in the society so that they may not rise again. This was true of Latin American society. Isabel Allende very rightly depicts

these issues in her novel. She criticizes the system of the society by writing this novel. She openly rejects the stands and agenda of upper class while they marginalize the lower class on the bases of different interests. These rich people exploited poor and put challenges in their way to make them more and more subjugated. This is very true of Latin American society. In the daily routine of life poor were outclassed and they made to do according to their own choices. The power theorists also supports this by giving arguments that power makes people do thing the way powerful people want. They exploited them and then brought them under their control. Many of these poor people had common problems and the solutions to these problems are only kept in the hands of rich people. Antonio Gramsci is of the opinion that power people had many benefits in the common life. They have got controlled over many benefits. They are enjoying many powerful tools which are used to subjugate them and kept them under control.

Conclusion

The novel has been analyzed through the concept of disciplinary power proposed by Michal Foucault. He is of the opinion that power never works alone rather it moves and operates making alliance with other power structures. The research after carefully designing the study concludes that power is not a single phenomenon rather it is combination of different structures which work in collaboration with other power structures. The novel is also divided into different power classes. Poor are considered inferior and far from the civilized world because a huge powerful agency of upper class exists in the society to outclass the poor. There is also practice and use of physical power in the novel. Esteban Garcia uses his power against peasants in order to take revenge from them.

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