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Finding a Voice: The Loss of Machismo Criticisms through Translation in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

La casa de los espíritus (*The House of the Spirits*), by Isabel Allende, chronicles the life and struggles of the del Valle family and their relatives in a fictitious Latin American country. Often presumed to mirror the social and political struggles of twentieth-century Chile, the narrative follows the lives of several women in the del Valle family, specifically the youngest daughter, Clara, and her marriage to Esteban Trueba, the *dueño*, or owner, of the hacienda Las Tres Marías ("The Three Marías"). In the original Spanish-language edition, the novel implies criticism of Esteban's machismo attitudes within patriarchal society. However, through certain English translations, this criticism is minimized through the use of softer language, which undermines the denunciation of Esteban's attitudes and places the book within the damaging culture of the patriarchy.

In this essay, two editions of Allende's novel will be compared: the original Spanish edition of *La casa de los espíritus* and the English edition of *The House of the Spirits*, translated by Magda Bogin. While both convey the same story of the del Valle family, the language used to voice Esteban's attitudes and the women's experiences with this demonstrate differing levels of space that the female characters are permitted to occupy within their lives. The temperate language utilized in the English translation restricts the space that Clara is permitted to occupy to

a subservient role below Esteban, thus eliminating the implicit criticisms of machismo present in the original Spanish text.

In translating a work to a new language, the translator's attention to detail is critical in order to ensure that the work maintains its original meaning. It is not the translator's responsibility—nor is it their right—to alter the work according to their own interpretations. The translator Lawrence Venuti points out that "the translator's responsibility is not . . . both foreign and domestic, but split into two opposing obligations: to establish a lexicographical equivalence for a conceptually dense text, while intelligibly maintaining its foreignness to domestic readerships" (115). The obligation of the translator is to create the closest equivalent possible to the text with respect to the author's original writing while also preserving its cultural context. The translator's responsibility is not to rewrite the piece as they see fit in the new language. Instead, they must create a communicable version of the work that still conveys the author's original intentions. Failure to do so can result in inaccurate renditions of the work that misrepresent and misinterpret the commentary implied in the original work.

Moreover, if a translation alters the meaning of the original text, this has severe consequences for the readers of the translation. For an audience that is unfamiliar with the culture and language of the original work, the social criticism and commentary that is presented from within the original culture and language is glossed over. Venuti notes that "the very choice of a foreign text for translation can also signify its foreignness by challenging domestic canons for foreign literatures and domestic stereotypes for foreign cultures" (82). An inaccurate translation eliminates any work that is being done within a culture to address social issues, such as machismo, and purports that it is only something that is examined by outside societies. This

creates a dangerous superiority complex where only outsiders believe that they notice social issues in the study of other cultures and their literary traditions.

Specifically, this sometimes results in the normalization of the exact issues that the author of the original work seeks to problematize in their writing, such as machismo in Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. Defined by the interdisciplinary researchers Aída Hurtado and Mrinal Sinha, *machismo* is characterized as "the male domination of women (and some men)" (11). The refusal to acknowledge these original criticisms eliminates the cultural autonomy of a specified group and any work that is being done from within to change a problematic cultural practice. For example, Hurtado and Sinha detail the cultural movement where "young, educated Latino men . . . are going beyond machismo to a deeper understanding of women's experiences and a commitment to ending gender oppression" in order to combat machismo culture from within Latin American society ("*Beyond Machismo*"). By failing to recognize Allende's earlier criticism of machismo, the English translation revokes the agency of present-day discourse from within the culture that seeks to examine and rectify the harms of machismo in order to create a more equitable society.

When these principles are applied to the English translation of *La casa de los espíritus,* it becomes evident that the significant difference in word choice between the original text and the translation substantially alters the critical intentions of Allende. Through examination of the original Spanish text, the critic Karen Wooley Martin observes that Allende's "works consciously reject the sexual norms imposed by . . . machismo" (104). Through subtle demonstrations of female power using spatial placement and the potency of silence, Allende constructs a powerful narrative of female liberation within restrictive patriarchal culture. She establishes strong-willed characters, both men and women, whose interactions demonstrate the

gendered struggles for power and dominance within a new age of Latin American society. These dynamics prove that the role of women was changing within mainstream society and that women were no longer expected to tolerate abuses of power from men in their lives.

In the first instance, in order to establish strong criticisms of machismo-motivated abuses, Allende introduces a male character who strongly embodies machismo characteristics. Early on in the narrative, Allende introduces the readers to Esteban Trueba, a young man who intends to marry Rosa del Valle. Esteban is first described in his own voice, where he explains that "si alguna vez me gustó alguna jovencita, no me atreví a acercarme a ella por temor a ser rechazado y al ridículo. He sido muy orgulloso y por mi orgullo he sufrido más que otros" ("if at some time, I liked some young woman, I did not dare get close to her for fear of rejection and ridicule. I have been very proud, and for my pride I have suffered more than others"; *Casa* 29; my trans.). Through extremely direct language, Esteban is portrayed as a machismo archetype within the limitations of the patriarchy. Here, he objectifies young women as a channel for his sexual desires and fulfillment. He thinks only of the consequences of approaching women in terms of his own reputation and ego and perceives the woman's rejection of him as a failure to win her over and, ultimately, to dominate her. This is emphasized by his use of the word "alguna" ("some"), which is repeated twice in the first clause of the sentence, demonstrating that Esteban's flighty temperament in his treatment of women has formed him as both a confident and an unaware womanizer.

However, this characterization is muted in the English translation, where Esteban shares that "if a young girl caught my eye, I didn't dare approach her, since I was afraid of being rejected and ridiculed. I've always been very proud, and because of my pride, I've suffered more than most" (Allende, *House* 20). Through the use of a more casual tone, where the verb *gustar*

("to be likeable") is replaced with the colloquialism "caught my eye," Esteban is framed in softer terms that eliminate his obvious and uncomfortable impassivity toward women. This is augmented by the complete redaction of the word "some" in the English translation, which removes the dangerously callous and frequent tendencies of Esteban to harm and subordinate women. Martin notes that in the original Spanish, "Trueba's gaze frames these peripheral women as components of the landscape, converting them into an extension of his physical property, so that his violation of even their corporeal space is justified in his eyes as an expression of patronal rights" (106–07). Despite this strong criticism of machismo that Allende presents, the dulled language the English translation employs eliminates most condemnation of Esteban's lack of willingness to grant the women in his life the agency to make their own decisions and control their own destiny. Instead, Esteban's behavior is regarded in less extreme terms, which not only makes it more palatable to the readers but also normalizes the extremeness of the very attitudes Allende attempts to critique.

In the second instance, the temperate translation of Esteban's attitudes toward women is paralleled in a restricted introduction to Esteban's future wife, Clara, who remained silent for many years before marrying Esteban. After witnessing the sexual assault of her sister's body, "el silencio la ocupó enteramente y no volvió a hablar hasta nueve años después, cuando sacó la voz para anunciar que se iba a casar" ("the silence occupied her entirely, and she did not return to speaking until nine years after, when she took out the voice to announce that she was going to marry"; Allende, *Casa* 45; my trans.). Here, the idea of occupation is presented: a force beyond Clara seems to prohibit her from speaking for nine years. The critic Ronie-Richele García-Johnson notices that Clara "existed, spiritually, in another space or dimension" (185). Through her silence, Clara distances herself from the world around her that has harmed both her and her

loved ones. Her silence demonstrates that she does not need to raise her voice against the constraints and damages that patriarchal society has done to her but instead that she has transcended these restraints to create a space that is undeniably hers within the silence. That being said, her decision to speak again is clearly rooted in her own will. The language used highlights that Clara chose to speak, and when she finally spoke, she utilized strong language to explain that she "se iba" ("was going") to be married. The words Clara uses demonstrate her strong-willed nature. Her statement and ultimate decision to speak gives her agency in deciding her own future.

Again, the English translation deviates from the original significance. Instead of foregrounding the idea of occupation, the English states that "silence filled her utterly. She did not speak again until nine years later when she opened her mouth to announce she was planning to be married" (Allende, *House* 35). The differing language presented highlights a dichotomy between the idea of occupation versus filling. While both words demonstrate some form of passivity, the word *fill* lends a different connotation, as if it was something that overwhelmed Clara; *to fill* suggests that the silence made Clara whole or united her with something, while the word *occupy* suggests a distancing from the world she had interacted with before. Moreover, the replacement of "going to marry" with "planning to be married" limits Clara's agency over her own future. Oftentimes, marriage was not a decision in which women had much voice; to eliminate Clara's certain announcement that she would be married reduces her fortitude to a simple request for permission from those who traditionally held power in a male-dominated society: her father and future husband. This restricts Clara's self-propelled agency to occupy her own space in society and control her future, subordinating her in an already-oppressive society that favors the views of men.

During her marriage, Clara survives significant abuse from Esteban. However, after a particularly violent episode where Esteban hits her, "Clara no volvió a hablar a su marido nunca más en su vida. . . . Esteban quedó humillado y furioso, con la sensación de que algo se había roto para siempre en su vida" ("Clara did not return to speaking to her husband ever more in her life. . . . Esteban remained humiliated and furious, with the sensation that something had broken forever in his life"; Allende, *Casa* 193; my trans.). The repetition of the phrase "no volvió" ("did not return"), which also appears in the passage describing Clara's nine-year silence, highlights Clara's resilience and use of silence to combat the toxic masculinity and abuse that Esteban has subjected her to. García-Johnson points out that Clara, through her silence, "had refused the masculine body access to her feminine world, and she swore not to enter masculine verbal space. Trueba was, more than frustrated, defeated; he could not touch Clara's soul, let alone control it" (189). Because of her resistance through silence, Clara is able to give herself the space she needs to physically leave her marriage with Esteban. While Esteban utilizes words in order to propel his violent actions, Clara turns to silence, not to endure the abuse but to gather her strength to combat and free herself from the cyclical nature of both Esteban's abuses and the patriarchal society he embodies.

Notwithstanding translation, the English version of this account alters Clara's power, stating that "Clara never spoke to her husband again. . . . Esteban, humiliated and furious, remained with the sensation that something in his life had been destroyed forever" (Allende, *House* 172). The parallel language between Clara's first turn to silence and this episode is not present in the English edition. This removal implies that Clara's silence is not a calculated tool to protect herself but instead is a nonstrategic coping mechanism that Clara turns to without reason.

Furthermore, the English translation also eliminates the emphasizing phrase “nunca más en su vida” (“ever more in her life”). This removes more of Clara’s agency and de-emphasizes her decision and power in this situation instead of demonstrating that her power transcends the confines of the patriarchy and Esteban. Additionally, because of this, there is less emphasis on the female power in the story and the feminist nature of Clara’s decision. She is passive in the English translation, which frames her as an inactive agent in her own liberation from abuse.

A final difference in this passage is that the English translation uses the verb *to destroy* to describe Esteban’s reaction to Clara in place of the Spanish verb *romper* (“to break”). A *break* implies that there was a rupture and that once-united parts—in this case, Clara and Esteban—have been cut off from each other; this was Clara’s doing, and her deliberate decisions resulted in this. However, *destruction* suggests that intrinsic forces violently finished their relationship. This shifts the focus to Esteban’s violent nature and entails that Clara created a messy conflict that she seemed to escape by chance instead of by her own actions.

Years later, even after her death, Esteban still seeks—yet fails—to control Clara. In his reflections on Clara’s death, Esteban expresses that “en mi mente, se confundían los dos amores de mi vida, Rosa, la del pelo verde, y Clara clarividente, las dos hermanas que tanto amé. Al amanecer, decidí que si no las había tenido en mi vida, al menos me acompañarían en la muerte” (“in my mind, the two loves of my life were confused, Rosa of the green hair, and Clara the clairvoyant, the two sisters whom I loved so much. At dawn, I decided that if I had not had them in my life, at least they would accompany me in death”; Allende, *Casa* 279–80; my trans.). Once again, Esteban seeks to subordinate Clara in ways that she never permitted him. The power of Clara’s silence continues in her death, removing her from the masculine world she carefully chose to isolate herself from. Although Esteban can decide on her body’s final resting place, he

could not have autonomy over her being. García-Johnson notes that "Trueba could build a house to contain wife [sic], and he could enter the space within her body, but he would never be allowed to enter the home she had built for herself inside her own head. Clara had defeated male domination" (186). Even by encapsulating Clara's body in a tomb for himself and Clara's sister, Clara's essence still remains unattainable for Esteban. Through the strength of her mind, Clara never allowed herself to succumb to the confines of Esteban's physical domination.

Once again, the English translation does not concur with the original text regarding Clara's final emancipation. Esteban states that "the two loves of my life, Rosa of the green hair and Clara the clairvoyant, the two sisters I adored, merged into one. At dawn I decided that if I hadn't been able to have them while I was alive, at least they would accompany me in death" (Allende, *House* 250). Here, in the only possible break from criticisms of toxic masculinity and machismo in Allende's writing, the verb *amar* ("to love") is replaced with the verb *to adore* in English. Esteban's attempt to demonstrate legitimate emotion after Clara's death showcases his desperation and, ultimately, his failure to submit Clara to his domination. His emotion does not come from grief—it stems from a conflated definition of love, which he assumes, as a man, means to possess and dominate, which he failed to achieve with Clara. The elimination of this emotion in the English translation simply perpetuates the original cycle of seeking "some" woman that is established when Esteban first introduces himself (29). Esteban's pattern of possessing women is broken by Clara's death because through his slight, but rare, expression of emotion, he has realized that he can only possess Clara's physical body instead of her essence and mind that he so strongly wished—yet failed—to command.

Ultimately, the use of more temperate language in the English translation of *La casa de los espíritus* eliminates the significant criticisms of Esteban's machismo behavior toward Clara

that are present in Allende's original writing. This removal alters possible character interpretations for an English-language audience and leads to the incorrect assumption that Allende passively wrote about machismo and seemed to normalize it in her writing. This leads to inaccurate understandings of the gender norms that Allende attempts to challenge—they are reduced to common behaviors that are not called into question or criticized. The failure to translate these criticisms results in a faulty comprehension of Latin American cultures regarding gender roles and equity movements that are taking place. Because the translation does not recognize these cultural shifts, it fuels the dangerous beliefs for English-language readers that only they can notice the faults of a culture and that those within the culture are unable to do this independently. Allende's work sought to challenge the accepted place of women in Latin American society and to demonstrate that women can demand change and free themselves from cyclical abuse perpetrated by the patriarchy. Without this, *The House of the Spirits* loses its value as a work that combats the traditional canon of male dominance in literature and incorrectly implies that it supports the patriarchal subordination of its female characters.

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