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I am (almost) a staunch (quasi-)“feminist” [sic]

*House of the Spirits*, written by Isabel Allende and translated by Magda Bogin, is a “feminist” novel. The feminism that *House of the Spirits* seems to align with most is the traditional liberal feminism (Fudge 1), that women should enjoy the same privileges as men. The most recognizable evidence for this is the emphasis on the issues of social equality and agency; Allende’s portrayal of these issues in *House of the Spirits* seem to stem from the distinct spheres of the worldly and the supernatural. “Worldly events”, in this case, implies the rapes that women endured, and represents the issue of social equality; the supernatural, on the other hand, tends to represent the issue of agency.

Equality is central to the liberal feminist ideal, and the rapes that occur in *House of the Spirits* are an indirect reference to said equality. The first rape that Allende describes is that of Pancha Garcia by Esteban; however, Allende reveals that “before [Pancha], her mother— and before her, her grandmother—had suffered the same animal fate” (Allende 57). Initially, this seems like a counterexample to social equality. However, that is a simplistic analysis: Allende’s emphasis of the repeated rapes through the generations highlights the existence of an accepted social inequality with regards to women. In her essay, *Shunned*, Meredith Hall concurs, noting how her friend—a male—was able to fight back against injustice “because he felt powerful”, but she was not, “[her] messy failure...feasted upon” (Hall 2). Later in the novel, Alba is raped by Esteban Garcia—interestingly, the grandchild of Pancha and Esteban— “another link in the chain

of events that had to complete itself” (Allende 431). Allende’s description of this cycle again suggests the social inequality women endure. Similarly, women of the New Left movement of the 1970s suggest that “heterosexuality is a compulsory institution designed to perpetuate the social power of men” (Krolokke 10). A rape is, in essence, the “powerful” abusing—attacking—the powerless, a statement of inequality. Ana’s rape by the guards “in the presence of her lover” is yet another example of such inequality (Allende 412). However, while Ana is at the receiving end of institutionalized social inequality, she remains “an indomitable woman” (Allende 412). Allende’s emphasis of Ana’s push against inequality suggests that remaining strong against social inequality is key for any improvement. Interestingly, where this strength should come from is a contested topic: Erin Morales-Williams, in her essay, notes that “writing for [herself] has always brought relief”, while Alice Walker states that only “collectively [women] can effect change” (Morales-Williams 1; Schnall 4). On one hand, there is strength from within, and on the other, there is strength in numbers. In this case, Allende’s portrayal of Ana Diaz seems to agree more with Morales-Williams’ approach to gaining social equality.

Another key issue for liberal feminists is the need for agency; if a woman cannot control her own actions, how is there to be equality? Allende seems to use the supernatural in *House of the Spirits* to symbolize agency. Given that Clara is the focal point of the novel with respect to spirits, most of the supernatural concerns Clara, but the Mora sisters and Rosa, among others, also interact with the supernatural. Esteban, in his marriage to Clara, desires to control her, but realizes that “if she continued living in a world of apparitions...[he] probably never [could]” (Allende 96). Allende, through the supernatural imagery, emphasizes how Clara is able to remain independent of Esteban. The “world of apparitions” is separate of the physical world, just how Clara is separate of Esteban. This is similar to the Suffragists’ goal, to break out of the “cult of

domesticity”, and that women should “wield only indirect influence” (Krolokke 5). The concept of self-determination is further emphasized when Clara and Esteban are discussing the names of their yet unborn twins: “[Clara’s] decision [is] inflexible” with regards to their names, even in the face of Esteban’s attempts to frighten her to reconsider (Allende 114). Before delving into the analysis, one thing must be elaborated: this scene does not seem like a “supernatural” one.

However, it is important to note that Clara, while pregnant, is very much detached from the world, and seldom comes down from her “Brahmanic refuge” (Allende 114). As such, this scene holds some supernatural significance. Allende’s emphasis of Clara’s passive resistance, so to speak, is yet another statement of agency. While Esteban is venting his rage, trying to make Clara do his bidding, Clara is doing as she pleases. Another example is Clara’s increased separation from Esteban in the period after the earthquake, where she claims “to have lost her natural inclination for the flesh”, and, as a result, decides to sleep in a room separate from Esteban (Allende 179). Again, even though Esteban tries to make her do his bidding, be it in a sexual nature or just getting her to be with him, Clara decides to do what she wants, going to her own room. It is important to note that again, the supernatural, while not explicitly described in this scene, is suggested by Clara’s loss of her “inclination for the flesh”, which implies an increased connection with the spiritual.

Feminism in *House of the Spirits* is a complex topic. There are many different types of feminism to choose from, and, from there, many issues to focus on. The issue of social equality is less a one-to-one symbol to the rapes than an inverse representation, a negative image of sorts. On the other hand, the issue of agency is, in essence, described through the independence of the spiritual realm from the physical realm, most heavily symbolized by the independence of Clara from Esteban, Clara with her three-legged table, and Esteban with his unending physical

advances, be it with blows from his cane or rapes. But perhaps this is not the case. Surely, someone, somewhere could have a completely different opinion. However, one statement is irrefutable: *House of the Spirits* is a feminist novel<sup>[citation needed]</sup>.

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