# Feminist and Political Erasure: *The House of the Spirits* Novel vs. Film

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**Abstract:** Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* is widely acclaimed for being one of the foundational novels of the Latin-American feminist literary canon. Unlike her precursors who often wrote from male perspectives, Allende's work foregrounded the unique voices and experiences of women. It was, however, precisely this essential characteristic that seems to be lacking in the film adaptation by Billie August. The film was accused of silencing the Third World feminist and political struggles in favour of a depoliticised narrative palatable to the Western audiences. In the film, two significant and well distinguished female characters have been merged into a single character. By comparing the novel and its adaptation, this paper seeks to explore how this major omission results in the reduction of two diverse and vibrant female characters into one. It will further speculate how the adaptation, from a feminist and political point of view, would've benefited had it not proceeded with this omission.

**Keywords:** Political Erasure, Feminism, Allende, August, Hutcheon, Chile, Adaptation, Magic Realism.

## Introduction

Originally written in Spanish, Isabel Allende's 1982 novel *The House of the Spirits* has been translated into over 30 languages and adapted into a film. *The House of the Spirits* is often seen as a transition from the Latin American Boom, which was dominated by male authors and experimental narratives, to the post-Boom, where gender, intimacy, and historical trauma took center stage. The book is celebrated for its rich thematic tapestry, which explores family legacy, class struggle, the intersection of personal and political lives, and the empowerment of women who assert their rights in a world that often denies their agency. Through its multi-generational saga, the novel foregrounds

women's voices and experiences, bringing to life their dynamic but often marginalized perspectives amid Chile's turbulent political history. The rich and complex characters of its three main female protagonists, that is, Clara, Blanca, and Alba, become the vehicle through which Allende traces their feminist and political resistance.

In 1993, Billie August, a celebrated and award-winning director, adapted Allende's seminal novel into a film. Despite its impressive cast, including sterling actors like Meryl Streep, Jeremy Irons, Glenn Close, and Winona Ryder, the film was largely regarded as a critical and commercial failure in the United States, a fate that stood in stark contrast to the success and awards it garnered in Europe (Kennedy). One of the central criticisms of the movie was that there was a profound mismatch between its tone and that of the novel. According to the film critic Roger Ebert, the film transformed the novel's "lusty, passionate Latin melodrama" into a "brooding, intellectualised drama" (Ebert). The second major criticism came with respect to its casting decision. In a narrative where Latin-American identity and political struggles take center stage, casting actors from the same ethnic background seems like the obvious direction to take. Yet, in the film, all the major roles were given to Anglo-European actors.

Due to this "whitewashing," the film faced widespread backlash and controversy, sparking protests from Latino actors who accused it of lacking authenticity (Kennedy). And finally, some of the critics lamented its "lackluster pacing" and "diffusely episodic structure" that struggled to present a multi-generational epic into a cohesive cinematic experience (Wikipedia). In the novel, it is through the characters of Clara, Blanca, and Alba, who embody distinct yet interconnected feminist and political trajectories, that Allende foregrounds women's voices and their intergenerational struggles. These critical dimensions have been substantially diluted in the movie, as the characters of Blanca and Alba, two distinct and vibrant female protagonists, have been mingled into a single character. Therefore, this paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Allende's novel and August's film adaptation of the same, examining how the film's choices diminish the novel's political and feminist aspects. It shall focus particularly on the merging of Blanca and Alba into a single character and,

through that, on the broader depoliticisation of the narrative as a whole. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory, feminist criticism, and Latin-American cultural studies, this research outlines how Billie August's adaptation tries to perform a form of cultural and ideological erasure, and speculates what the film could have been if it had retained the distinct trajectories of Blanca and Alba and had "faithfully" translated the novel's subversive core.

**Feminist Perspective in Allende's Novel**

Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* blends magical realism, the political upheaval of Chile at the time of the Coup, and a family saga into a narrative that showcases female agency in an otherwise male-dominated literary landscape. The novel allows the voices of its female characters, especially that of Clara, Blanca and Alba, to shape the history of their family, as well as the memory of an entire nation (Smith 79-81). In the novel, both Alba and her grandfather, Esteban Trueba, a representative of patriarchy and republicanism, take turns narrating their own versions of events. Esteban's retellings are in first person and showcase his patriarchal leanings whereas Alba's narrative is more inclusive and female-centric. On the other hand, Clara, wife of Esteban Trueba and one of the most important characters in the novel, defies patriarchal control throughout the novel with her silence and her magical gifts. When Esteban goes into a fit of rage after he discovers his daughter Blanca has taken a peasant for a lover, Clara reminds him that he, in his youth, raped multiple peasant women. Enraged, Esteban strikes her, and when she recovers from the blow, Clara never speaks to him again (Thomson 42). Through this act of defiance, Clara swore never to enter Trueba's masculine verbal space. On the one hand, her muteness, far from signifying powerlessness, becomes a chosen form of resistance against Esteban's violence and the broader constraints on women that predominate the Chilean society. On the other hand, her supernatural abilities are symbolically linked to female agency, suggesting alternative epistemologies and valorising women's intuition and resistance. Clara is also the one who chronicles the family history through her journaling. Towards the end of the novel, these journals are revealed to be the primary source of Alba's narrative.

Clara's daughter, Blanca, on the other hand, exhibits her feminist defiance through her resilient pursuit of forbidden love with the socialist and revolutionary Pedro Tercero. By having a scandalous affair with a peasant employed in her father's estate, Tres Marías, she refuses to conform to class and gender expectations. Her story runs parallel to, and yet sharply diverges from that of her daughter, Alba. In the development of this multi-generational struggle, the latter represents the third generation of strong women who actualise the family's feminist and political consciousness. Unlike the previous generation, Alba resists conformity in every sphere of life, especially in the political sphere, where she effectuates positive change in people's lives by playing an active and indispensable role in the revolution (Thomson 21-22).

Allende's novel is inseparable from the Chilean history of the infamous military coup. By weaving the personal stories of women within national struggles of class conflict, political repression, and the trauma of dictatorship, she displays the intersections of gendered and political violence. Alba's narrative highlights the erasure of marginalized voices under an oppressive regime and illustrates the necessity of collective resistance. The novel's structure resists linear, patriarchal histories. Allende constructs a circular, memory-based narrative that allows forgotten and traumatic events to be remembered and re-inscribed into collective consciousness (Smith 80). In doing so, the novel functions as both an act of resistance against historical amnesia and a feminist intervention in the politics of memory (Youssef 78).

**The Political and Feminist Erasure in August's Adaptation**

Billie August, in the process of adapting Allende's novel into a movie, drastically alters the narrative structure of the novel, most notably by merging two distinct characters, that is Blanca and Alba, into a single character. By merging their unique trajectories, the film renders invisible the generational transmission of resistance, care, and feminist agency that is central to the novel. In the novel, it is Alba who endures physical and mental torture by Esteban García, the illegitimate grandson of Esteban Trueba, her grandfather. Whereas, in August's adaptation, it is Blanca who is shown to be the political activist who experiences the torture. This results in the erasure of Alba's critical role as a narrator-

witness and as a political revolutionary. Conversely, the film conveniently omits Blanca's significant role in aiding and hiding Pedro Tercero, a revolutionary and a criminal under the regime of the Republican party, right under her father's nose, who is a Senator of the same party. It further eliminates the dynamic tension between a mother and a daughter and the intergenerational evolution of feminist consciousness, both of which are so central to the novel. Furthermore, August's film also leaves out Clara's defiance against Trueba's patriarchal control, which she achieves through her refusal to enter his verbal space.

This results in not merely a loss of narrative complexity, but also substantially diminishes feminist representation. Blanca's defiance in love and her hazardous navigation of patriarchal and class boundaries differ significantly from Alba's direct confrontation of political violence and the aftermath of dictatorship (González 22-23). The flattening of these figures into a single character stunts the diversity and richness of feminine experience that the novel so carefully records. By erasing these nuanced and resistant voices, it commits what Hutcheon might call a "transcultural adaptation," but one that represses, rather than reinterprets, the novel's subversive energies (Hutcheon 147-149). As Hutcheon notes, when it comes to Hollywood, transculturation often means "Americanizing" a work (Hutcheon 146). In a similar vein, August's transcultural adaptation of Allende's novel seems like an example of a broader Westernization of the latter. Hence, August's movie adaptation received criticism for its broader depoliticisation and cultural erasure. The film downplays Chilean history, bypassing the military coup and subsequent dictatorship, thereby diminishing the political stakes of the story. The activism and resistance of key revolutionary characters, like Pedro Tercero, Blanca, and Alba, are either glossed over or neutralised in favour of a more generic melodrama.

Additionally, the casting of white, English-speaking actors for quintessentially Chilean roles adds an additional layer of erasure. The film's aesthetics, that is, its settings, dialogue, and even costuming, appeal to a Western gaze, framing the story as a universal family tragedy at the expense of its rootedness in Latin American, and specifically Chilean culture and resistance (Rodriguez 49).

The film not only marginalizes Third World feminist and political struggles, but it also tries to make Allende's subversive core more palatable to the Western audience.

Another tragic effect of the adaptation is the loss of narrative polyphony. The novel's dynamic interplay between female and male voices, between first-person and third-person, is replaced by a simplified, often external perspective. Alba's unique position as both a survivor of political violence and the inheritor of women's history is replaced with a more detached, masculine-ordered ending that dilutes the transformative potential of testimony and memory.

**What Could Have Been and Conclusion**

August's adaptation could have retained the distinction between Blanca's private, domestic resistance and Alba's public, political activism. Alba's survival of the torture and her choice to break the chain of revenge by forgiving Esteban Garcia are not merely plot points, but statements on historical memory, agency, and hope in the post-dictatorship era. Including Alba as a distinct figure would also have allowed for an intersectional depiction of women's struggles: not only as mothers or lovers, but as radical historic actors in their own right. The character of Clara would have likewise benefited had the director chosen to retain her multi-dimensionality in the film: her ability to see and communicate with spirits, to foresee future events, and her complex relationship with her husband and her children. Such directorial choices would have entrusted the adaptation with a more polyphonic and complex structure, creating space for the recovery of lost or silenced stories, proclaiming the feminist and political inheritance that Allende's novel seeks to preserve.

Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* is an act of feminist and political recovery, mapping the ways women remember, resist, and survive amid violence and erasure. The film adaptation's merging of Blanca and Alba, alongside its broader depoliticization and cultural flattening, constitutes an act of narrative and ideological erasure that robs the story of its resistant core. This loss is not simply a problem of plot or character, but a silencing of the diverse, polyphonic, and transformative voices that make the novel a foundational text of Latin American feminist literature.

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