

The Subaltern in Memoir: Representation, Voice, and Epistemic Violence in Isabel Allende's *The Soul of a Woman*

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ABSTRACT

*This study offers a Spivakian reading of Isabel Allende's *The Soul of a Woman* (2021), through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of the "subaltern" and the violence of speaking for others. In *The Soul of a Woman* (2021), Isabel Allende offers a vibrant memoir-manifesto that chronicles her life as a feminist activist and writer. Through Spivak's lens "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), the current study argues that Allende's memoir consciously contests epistemic violence by recovering women's histories and demanding justice, but it can also slip into the very patterns Spivak critiques. Allende's global platform invites us to ask: whose voices are actually being heard in this memoir? The trouble of "speaking into silence" is precisely what Gayatri Spivak diagnosed in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). Spivak argued that members of subordinated groups especially colonized women are often silenced not only by systemic oppression, but by attempts to represent them, which can distort or overwrite their subjectivity. This research investigates whether these women emerge as subjects with agency or whether their experiences are mediated, interpreted, and ultimately spoken for by Allende's privileged narrative voice. The researchers have employed the method of textual analysis for this study. Spivak's concept of the subaltern has been used in readings of Allende's earlier fiction, there is little to no sustained work applying "can the subaltern speak?" specifically to the soul of a woman. By foregrounding this tension between representation and epistemic violence, the paper situates Allende within debates on feminist memoir, global South feminisms, and the politics of voice, suggesting that her text is most critically valuable when read not as a transparent platform for the subaltern, but as a site where the limits and risks of writing subaltern lives are exposed. Thus this study explores how Allende's portrayal of marginalized women enables their agency and how her narration risks reproducing the epistemic violence Spivak attributes to elite feminist discourse.*

Keywords: Subaltern, Epistemic violence, Memoir, Feminist activist, Subjectivity, Postcolonial critique, Agency

INTRODUCTION

"This is what women want: to be safe, to be valued... to have control over their bodies and lives." (Allende, 2021, p. 99). With this clear, declarative sentence, Allende articulates a universal desire that should be self-evident. Yet the force of this line lies not in its simplicity, but in the reality it exposes: if women's desires are so fundamental, why has history so persistently failed to hear them? This tension between women's lived experiences and the structures that deny those experiences discursive space resonates throughout Allende's *The Soul of a Woman* (2021). Isabel Allende, one of the most influential

Latin American writers of the last half-century, has built her literary career around women's struggles, silences, and survivals. From *The House of the Spirits* (1982) to *Island Beneath the Sea* (2010), Allende has consistently centered women in narratives shaped by dictatorship, colonialism, and patriarchal authority. Allende's *The Soul of a Woman* (2021) is at once a personal memoir and a manifesto of lifelong feminist commitment. The book recounts her early awareness of injustice ("I was a feminist in kindergarten," p. 1), her experiences growing up in a patriarchal Chilean household, and her encounters with women across cultures whose stories reveal the persistent global structures that constrain female autonomy. Allende endeavors to create a discourse of global feminist solidarity that links her childhood experiences. She writes not only as a Chilean literary star but explicitly as a woman of the global South, invoking the voices of subaltern women who suffer patriarchal violence and colonial legacies. Throughout the text, Allende foregrounds themes of resilience, structural violence, and the need for collective advocacy. Allende's memories brim with the question of voice. Although Allende's memoir positions itself as a celebration of womanhood and an appeal for global feminist solidarity, yet it repeatedly introduces women whose lives are shaped by structural silencing—poor domestic workers, undocumented migrants, survivors of honor violence, and young girls subjected to patriarchal control. This study addresses these questions by offering a Spivakian reading of *The Soul of a Woman* (2021), examining how Allende constructs feminist narrative authority and how that authority interacts with her depiction of subaltern women. Through close textual analysis, the research explores the memoir's attempts to give visibility to structurally silenced subjects and interrogates the ethical and theoretical tensions that arise when a privileged narrator speaks on behalf of women whose voices remain unheard.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical work on Isabel Allende has long recognized her as a writer deeply engaged with women's lives, power, and resistance. Alcoff, L. (1991), have explored the problems of "speaking for others," noting that even when well-intentioned, telling someone else's story inevitably shapes it with the teller's own subjectivity. Frenk, S (1996), early essay on Allende situates her fiction within gendered, socio-economic, and political motivations for feminism, showing how her narratives negotiate authority, class, and national history through female experience.

Uma Narayan's *The Project of Feminist Epistemology* (1997) further enriches this analysis by emphasizing the need for feminist theories to engage with the cultural and historical contexts of women's lives. Allende's memoir is a reflection of this approach, as it places women's experiences in a specific political, social, and historical context. Narayan's insistence on considering women's identities within these frameworks resonates with Allende's focus on the complexities of postcolonial gender struggles.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes* (2000) critiques Western feminism for oversimplifying and homogenizing the experiences of women in the Global South. Allende's narrative counters this by providing a rich, contextual exploration of women's lives shaped by both patriarchy and colonial legacies. She resists a one-dimensional portrayal of women's oppression, offering a multifaceted view of women's agency in postcolonial societies, which aligns with Mohanty's call for recognizing the diversity of women's lived experiences.

Behabadi (2013) examines Isabel Allende's novels from a postcolonial and transcultural perspective. The study analyzes Allende's use of magical realism and thematic structures to create hybrid narratives that challenge colonial discourses and represent the voices of marginalized groups. By focusing on *The House of the Spirits*, *Daughter of Fortune*, and *Zorro*, the dissertation explores how Allende rewrites history from the perspectives of the colonized, presenting a transcultural identity that blends various cultural influences. Behabadi highlights the hybridity in Allende's work, showing how her characters embody a mestizo identity, blending indigenous, European, and other cultural elements. The analysis emphasizes how Allende's writing serves as a form of resistance, offering a counter-discursive space that transcends

traditional binaries of colonizer/colonized. The study concludes that Allende's novels not only critique the colonial past but also provide a new model for literary and cultural synthesis through transculturation. Hall, A. (2014), explores problems of voicelessness in Isabel Allende's *Paula* (1995) through a focus on the story of Paula's illness and subsequent death from porphyria in 1992. Paulma, M. E.(2016), reads Allende locationally and politically, showing how her female characters gain power through intellect, relationships, and moral resistance in post-dictatorial Latin American contexts. Selvarani, R. R., & Hussain, D. M. Z. (2019), highlight "magical feminism" in Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* where magical realism becomes a tool to articulate specifically female experiences and to challenge androcentric histories. Postcolonial criticism has also engaged Allende's writing as a site of counter-discursive resistance. Wall (2020) discusses the feminist use of magic realism in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, arguing that Allende's incorporation of magical elements challenges patriarchal oppression. Perveen, S (2023), surveys *Soul of a Woman's* content, noting how Allende recounts global feminist episodes, child marriages in Nepal, torture in Latin America, activism in Kathmandu, but without deeper theory.

Marshall (2024) explores in "*Feminist Interpretations of Isabel Allende's The House of the Spirits*" that the feminist dimensions of Allende's novel, particularly focusing on gender dynamics, female agency, and resistance within Chilean society. The article delves into how Allende critiques traditional gender roles, addressing the intersectionality of gender with social class and ethnicity, and how women's experiences of oppression, resilience, and empowerment shape the narrative. Marshall's feminist analysis asserts that Allende's work is a significant contribution to feminist literature, inviting readers to reconsider power, femininity, and historical narratives from a gendered perspective.

Vargay (2025) explores how magical realism in the works of Isabel Allende and Gabriel García Márquez highlights women's struggles for agency in patriarchal societies. Vargay examines the ways in which marginalized women's voices in these authors' texts serve to critique neocolonial gender norms, illustrating how magic becomes a means of self-actualization for women who resist these oppressive systems. Zahoor and Ghaffar (2025), analyzed narrative mediation and subalternity in the depiction of enslaved Black women in colonial Haiti in *Island Beneath the Sea* through Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak? Critics generally place *the soul of a woman* at the intersection of memoir, feminist essay, and political meditation. Wulff's (2025) interview with Allende deepens the image of her as a feminist historian of memory: she explains how her fiction is always anchored in concrete histories yet tries to recover the "silenced voices" erased by official, male-dominated narratives.

The Soul of a Woman exemplifies feminist autobiography as a form of resistance. Smith, in *Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (1987), notes that autobiographies by women often serve to challenge societal structures that attempt to suppress their voices. Allende's memoir provides not just a personal story but a broader feminist critique, reclaiming women's voices and asserting agency despite the constraints imposed by patriarchy and colonialism.

Taken together, the literature situates Allende as a global feminist voice who inherits Latin American postcolonial sensibilities. What is missing is a Spivakian reading of *The Soul of a Woman*: an examination of how Allende's feminist authority confronts the "subaltern" in her text. This analysis aims to fill that gap. This study analyzes Allende's to frame her treatment of marginal women Spivak's (1988) lens and brings Allende into conversation with a rich field of feminist and postcolonial scholarship, while highlighting how her memoir extends those ideas in a Latin American context.

Research Questions

1. In what ways does the memoir's representation of marginalized, indigenous, working-class, and migrant women reveal the Spivakian tension between "speaking for" the subaltern and enabling the conditions for her to speak?
2. How does Isabel Allende's feminist narration in *The Soul of a Woman* shape the representation of marginalized women, and does it ultimately resonate with the epistemic violence Spivak associates with speaking for the subaltern?

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in postcolonial feminist theory, drawing centrally on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) argument in "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*"? Spivak's "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" is a dense essay that revolutionized postcolonial feminism by interrogating who gets to speak and be heard. Spivak focuses on the condition of subaltern (i.e., subordinate, marginalized) women in colonial contexts. Spivak (1988) famously declares, "The subaltern cannot speak," not as a universal verdict that all individual silences are perpetual, but as a caution: within Western or elite frameworks, the subaltern's *agency* is systematically denied. Spivak's (1988) critique establishes that the subaltern woman occupies a space of structural unhearability, where patriarchal, cultural, and class hierarchies deny her access to the circuits of representation. Her famous assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" does not imply literal voicelessness; rather, it highlights the discursive and institutional conditions that prevent marginalized women from being recognized as speaking subjects. Spivak's (1988) notions of epistemic violence and double domination become especially relevant when analyzing figures like Shamila in Allende's memoir, whose experiences are shaped by patriarchal surveillance, forced marriage, and the normalization of violence. In such cases, the subaltern woman exists in what Spivak calls "shadow," her story surviving only through the mediation of a more privileged narrator.

The framework also draws on Spivak's (1988, P .73) distinction between political representation (*Vertretung*) and re-presentation (*Darstellung*), a distinction that is essential for evaluating Allende's narrative authority. Memoir, as a genre, inevitably positions the writer as both witness and interpreter, and when Allende recounts the lives of maids, undocumented migrants, or victims of honor killings, she occupies the dual role of feminist advocate and narrative gatekeeper. Feminist life-writing theorists such as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010), remind us that personal narratives are shaped by selective memory, authorial positioning, and interpretive framing. Allende's memoir, though compassionate and politically committed, operates within this mediated space where speaking for the subaltern risks collapsing their lived complexity into symbolic or illustrative forms. Thus, Spivak's (1988) concerns around the privileged feminist who inadvertently reproduces silencing become central to analyzing how Allende constructs and deploys narrative power. Together, these theoretical strands provide a coherent lens through which to examine *The Soul of a Woman*, (2021) allowing the study to interrogate how Allende represents, mediates, or constrains subaltern women's voices and how her memoir navigates the ethical tensions between solidarity and narrative authority.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Subaltern Women in Allende's *The Soul of a Woman*: a Spivakian Analysis

In *The Soul of a Woman*,(2021) Isabel Allende populates her memoir not only with herself and familiar contemporaries, but with a gallery of "subaltern" women drawn from various geographies and classes. These include ordinary Chilean women (her mother, working-class compatriots), but also global South figures: a Nepali child bride, American domestic workers, a Mexican political prisoner, and more.

Spivak's (1988) framework examines who among these is truly able to speak for herself, and how does Allende's narration affect their "voice"? Drawing on Spivak's (1988) subaltern lens 1988, *The Soul of a Woman* weaves various threads for analysis. It unveils women as central pillars, men as absences: the gendered architecture of voice and silence.

Feminist Narrative Authority in *the Soul of a Woman*:

Throughout *The Soul of a Woman* (2021), Allende's narrative authority is maintained by a combination of personal credibility, ethical intent, and reflexive candor. Her argument is that her authority *challenges* patriarchal and colonial discourses from within the same cultural milieu. On the opening page, Allende immediately situates her feminism within personal history, intergenerational vulnerability, and patriarchal abandonment. Her statement that she "was a feminist in kindergarten" (Allende, p. 1) is not a romantic exaggeration but the foundation of a narrative shaped by early exposure to gendered injustice. She is not claiming precocious ideology; she is signaling that the conditions of her early life placed her in proximity to a subaltern female position, where the mechanisms of patriarchy became visible long before she had the language to name them.

The story of her mother Panchita abandoned in Peru with a newborn and two toddlers becomes the emotional and political trigger for Allende's early rebellion against male authority. For Allende as a child, her mother's suffering becomes her first encounter with gendered injustice. Panchita cannot "speak" in the Spivakian sense not because she is voiceless, but because the systems around her (family, society, law) render her speech ineffective, unheard, or irrelevant. The father's disappearance marks the asymmetry: his actions shape the family's fate, but the consequences fall entirely on the woman whose endurance is taken for granted. Spivak's (1988) lens helps to read this moment as the beginning of a consciousness shaped by proximity to subalternity. Spivak's (1988) argument that patriarchal authority is sustained not only through domination but through the male freedom to exit without consequence. The woman, by contrast, remains bound to familial duty, social shame, and the weight of survival. This is a form of structural silencing: the man's disappearance is permitted and absorbed into cultural norms, while the woman's suffering remains private, unrecorded, and beyond institutional recognition. This affirms Spivak's argument that Panchita is positioned as the subaltern because her pain is not socially narratable; it exists but carries no discursive power. Through this opening, Allende shows that feminism is not something she adopted later in life; it is the outcome of witnessing her mother's struggle, understanding the imbalance of power, and growing up within the structures that demanded women endure while men escaped accountability.

Women as pillars, men as absences: the gendered architecture of voice and silence

In Latin American context, Allende's memoir highlights local subaltern women too. She quotes her mother, who silently bore family burdens. Allende writes, "Women are the pillar of the family...where fathers come and go" (Allende, P.8) her mothers, and women like her, are made visible through Allende's praise. , Allende reflects on her father's disappearance and expands this personal memory into a broader commentary on Chilean social structure. Through a Spivakian lens it reveals the structural expectations and burdens placed on women, especially subaltern women, under patriarchal systems. The metaphor of the woman as "pillar" is not neutral; it signals that stability, continuity, and emotional labor are demanded from women precisely because patriarchal society grants men the freedom to be transient. This affirms Spivak's (1988) argument that subaltern women's agency is circumscribed: they cannot move, choose, or depart because their positionality is shaped by cultural expectations of duty, honor, and sacrifice. Patriarchy grants the man choice and the woman obligation. In this sense, the statement encapsulates Spivak's critique: the subaltern woman's strength is acknowledged only in ways that keep her silent, dutiful, and indispensable never in ways that grant her voice, autonomy. Moreover it also reveals a core paradox at the heart of patriarchal societies: women hold families together, but their centrality is precisely

what keeps them trapped in roles that deny them public voice. This tension aligns directly with Spivak's (1988) assertion that the subaltern woman is structurally unheard not because she lacks strength or presence, but because the systems that rely on her also ensure she cannot speak as a political subject.

Gendered silencing, and patriarchal Injustice

One prominent thread is Allende's portrayal of women who have suffered patriarchal violence under intersecting oppressions. Allende introduces Shamila as a symbol of patriarchal injustice beyond the West. She does not directly quote Shamila, but describes her plight with empathy: "Shamila and hundreds like her languish in silence, their childhood stolen by tradition" (Allende, P.23). Shamila's story becomes the most visceral embodiment of Spivak's (1988) lens Can subaltern Speak? Here, the subaltern woman is not only unheard; she is rendered unheard. Everything around her, her father, her culture, the legal system, even international institutions collaborates in silencing her. Her father's fear of her "Western customs," his insistence that she cover herself, avoid eye contact, avoid reading or music, and refrain from interacting with men all of this represents the production of a patriarchal subject, a girl whose identity is crafted through restriction and erasure. When she dares to speak to question her forced marriage the system responds with punishment: beatings, imprisonment, and the breaking of her will. Violence here is not accidental; it is the mechanism by which the subaltern female is kept in a position where speech is impossible.

Shamila embodies Spivak's subaltern woman precisely because she is trapped within overlapping structures. Allende's statement captures the structural and generational dimensions of subaltern oppression with remarkable clarity. Through a Spivakian lens (1988), this line also becomes a powerful articulation of how patriarchy, cultural norms, and familial authority work together to produce the muted subaltern girl, whose suffering is simultaneously individualized and collective. Spivak (1988, p.24) argues that the subaltern woman's silence is not voluntary; it is produced by epistemic violence, the systematic erasure of her voice from cultural, legal, and linguistic system. Tradition becomes the mechanism through which patriarchal authority is legitimized; it is tradition that licenses the early silencing of girls and frames their suffering as culturally appropriate rather than politically intolerable. In this sense, Shamila represents not a singular victim but the structural impossibility of subaltern girlhood. Her stolen childhood parallels Spivak's argument that the subaltern woman exists in a space where her story can only survive when narrated by someone with greater access to language, authority, and visibility.

In *The Soul of a Woman*, Allende is not simply telling personal stories; she is documenting the structural impossibility of female speech within patriarchal systems, the very condition Spivak identifies as central to understanding the subaltern woman's position. Shamila thus becomes the clearest living proof of Spivak's (1988) argument: the subaltern woman cannot speak—not because she lacks a voice, but because every system around her is designed to ensure that her voice cannot be heard.

Violence as patriarchal structure and the erasure of female suffering

In *The Soul of a Woman*, Allende makes a striking observation: When she bluntly states, "Violence against women is universal and as old as civilization...if a man is beaten and deprived of his freedom, it's called torture" (Allende, P. 102), exposes the double standard at the heart of global patriarchal structures. By contrasting the treatment of male suffering with female suffering Allende reveals a crucial mechanism of subaltern silencing. This mirrors Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern woman cannot "speak" because her pain does not register within official, political, or institutional frameworks. She experiences violence, but it is not counted. She is harmed, but not heard. Spivak (1988) argues that the subaltern woman is not simply oppressed; she is rendered inaudible within dominant discourses. Her suffering does not enter legal or political language in the same way male suffering does. Allende's juxtaposition

demonstrates this linguistic and ideological hierarchy: when a man's bodily violation is named torture, it becomes a human rights issue, prompting institutional recognition, documentation, and public outrage. When women experience deprivation, confinement, or assault, the violence is absorbed into the background of "civilization," framed as part of the private sphere or dismissed as an unfortunate but expected element of gendered existence. Allende's comparison of language reveals how discourse itself participates in the silencing of women. In Spivak's (1988, p. 24) terms, this is epistemic violence: the reclassification of female pain into categories that minimize its political meaning. This linguistic shift moves women's suffering out of the realm of human rights and into the realm of household misfortune, thereby stripping it of urgency, legitimacy, and visibility. Allende is not simply pointing out a social hypocrisy; she is exposing the hierarchy of whose pain matters. In foregrounding this double standard, Allende exposes the systemic naturalization of female pain and gestures toward a feminist counter-discourse. Yet her critique also raises the Spivakian question of whether naming the problem from a privileged position fully addresses the deeper structural muting of the women whose suffering remains normalized. The tension between visibility and voice, between speaking *about* women's pain and enabling women to speak for themselves remains central to both Allende's memoir and the subaltern framework through which it can be read.

Allende's assertion that...murdering a woman over a matter of honor is not even reported (Allende, P.102) reflects Spivak's idea of erasure from history. A woman whose murder is not documented is not only voiceless in life but also is voiceless in death. Allende is pointing to violence deeper than the physical act: the violence of erasure. The subaltern woman does not simply lose her life; she loses her place in discourse. Her death is never transformed into a claim for justice, a political event, or a historical fact. It is absorbed into silence, leaving the patriarchal order unchallenged. Allende's observation also exposes how patriarchal societies control narrative itself. Honor killings eliminate both the woman and the story of her elimination. This aligns with Spivak's (1988) concept of epistemic violence, where elite or patriarchal knowledge systems overwrite the experiences of the marginalized. Honor killing victims also represent the absolute extreme of subalternity, where even death does not grant visibility. Thus, the unreported honor killing exemplifies the *absolute limit* of subalternity: when a woman's life and death remain outside all structures of representation, she becomes the pure embodiment of Spivak(1988)'s haunting question, "*Can the subaltern speak?*" a question that, in this context, answers itself.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal how Isabel Allende's memoir *The Soul of a Woman* (1988) both exposes and navigates the structural conditions that silence marginalized women. Through narratives such as Shamila's "thin, mute... a shadow of the girl she had been" (Allende, 2021, p. 23) and accounts of honor killings "not even reported," Allende highlights the discursive erasure that defines subaltern womanhood. These episodes echo Spivak's claim that the subaltern woman is forced into "shadow," rendered inaudible by intersecting systems of patriarchy, class, and cultural ideology. Yet Allende's own position as a privileged, globally recognized writer introduces the very tension Spivak warns about: her memoir becomes a site where she must speak *about* women who cannot speak for themselves, a narrative act that gestures toward solidarity while also confronting the limits of representation.

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