



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 11. Issue.2. 2024 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE MIRABAL SISTERS: JULIA ALVAREZ'S *IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES* AS A FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

Shradha Sudhir

Research Scholar, Department of English, St. Joseph's College, Devagiri, Calicut,
University of Calicut

Email: shradha.santhra@gmail.com

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.11.2.135](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.11.2.135)



Shradha Sudhir

Article information

Article Received:23/5/2024
Article Accepted:25/06/2024
Published online:30/06/2024

ABSTRACT

The Dominican Republic-American author Julia Alvarez's 1994 novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a perfect example of historiographic metafiction as it depicts the travails of the Dominican Republic citizens during the reign of the dictator Trujillo, through the story of the Mirabal sisters. Alvarez by narrating the historical events through the perspective of the sisters give a feminist turn to the events. The personal stories of the sisters are combined with the political history of the land offering a fictional angle to the historical events. The structure of the novel oscillates between events from the personal history of the sisters and the political events happening in the Dominican Republic at that time. Alvarez by speaking through the voice of the sisters challenges the mainstream production of history and frames history through the narrative voice of the silenced Other. The novel is a postmodern text that challenges the concept of an absolute truth and rewrites history to present truth from different angles.

Key words: Historiographic metafiction, feminism, history, truth, testimony.

Historiographic metafiction, a concept introduced by Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in the late 1980s, blends fiction, history, and theory. This term describes fictional works that merge metafictional techniques with historical narratives. These works are characterized by their frequent references to other artistic, historical, and literary texts, demonstrating the interconnectedness and reliance of both literature and historiography on the history of discourse. Published in 1994, Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* is a historical fiction that is set in the Dominican Republic during mid-twentieth century, a time when the country was under the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. The novel narrates the story of the martyrdom of the Mirabal sisters- Patria, Minerva and Maria Teresa Mirabal who are considered as national icons of freedom and women's emancipation. The sisters were assassinated by Trujillo in the autumn of 1960 claiming they did treason as they secretly worked against the Trujillo government. The murder of the sisters stirred the anger of the citizens and led to

large uprising against the dictator which eventually led to the downfall of the Trujillo regime. Honouring the sacrifice of the sisters, the date of their death November 25 is labelled as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women by the United Nations in 1999.

Rafael Leonidas Tujillo, nicknamed as El Jefe, was a Dominican military commander and dictator who ruled the Dominican Republic for over three decades starting from 1930 to May 1961 when he was assassinated. The period is considered as one of most brutal violence in the history of Dominican Republic. Trujillo's paramilitary forces, including the infamous SIM (Servicio de Inteligencia Militar or the Military Intelligence Service), tortured and murdered about 50,000 people, the majority of which were migrant Haitians. Due to the cruelty meted out on protestors, secret underground efforts were taken to topple the autocrat. Mirabal sisters were the participants of one such underground group. Julia Alvarez's father was a participant of a revolutionary group but when he got noticed by Trujillo's military force he fled to America with his family. The news of the murder of the sisters shook the Dominican conscience and haunted the thoughts of Alvarez which led her to pen a novel in honour of their bravery and sacrifice.

The first chapter opens in the year 1994 with introducing the last surviving Mirabal sister, Dedé Mirabal who lives in her childhood home which now has become a museum in honour of her sisters. She is being interviewed by a Dominican-American writer and the story of the family and the turbulent political history of the country is revealed. Alvarez through her skilful writing brings to life each sister structuring the novel into chapters narrated by each sister. The novel begins as a coming-of age narrative four sisters who as any ordinary girl imagines a life of love, freedom and familial relationships. But their stories change direction as they eventually decide to join the revolution. Dedé survives the torture as she joined the revolution "when it was already too late." (Alvarez 10) Through the narratives of the sisters Alvarez portrays the brutal history of her homeland and how their freedom were completely curtailed. In an interview with Josephine Reed, Alvarez says that,

in the *Time of the Butterflies* is a book that helped me understand my country's story and my parents' story. It was a book that I had to write, because it was a debt that I owed. We were the family that got out and came to the United States, and here I am – an American writer. And what is the responsibility of those who survive? To remember, and to remind. It's through telling the story that we really understand the full complexity of what happened to us. Not just the facts, not just the either/or, but the full, textured complexity of a dictatorship and how we got out of it. (Reed 5)

The novel extends from 1938-1994, focusing mainly on the regime of Trujillo and its aftermath. Alvarez's writing tries to document the revolutionary activities of the leftist underground movement called *Movimiento Revolucionario 14 de Junio* (June 14 Revolutionary Movement or the June 14 Political Group) founded by Minerva and Manolo Tavárez Justo. The novel also sheds light into the historical role of women and their significant contribution in the formation of a free and democratic nation. Dedé acts as repository containing all the silenced female stories and a witness to public and private cruelties against women. Through her narration the complexities of the inner lives of the characters are revealed.

The ensuing chapters are first person narratives where each of the sisters appear to tell their stories. Here the traditional feminine aspects of a woman as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, friend is combined with her image as a fierce revolutionary. The public and private self of the women, the personalities of each and how they differ from each other is vividly drawn in the chapters. Minerva emerges as the most fierce among them taking initiative to challenge not just the political patriarchal but the ones in private spheres too. Outspoken in nature, she joins the revolution at an early age when she was only student. The testimonies of her classmate Sinita Perozo about "the secret of Trujillo", and the massacre of Perozo family leads Minerva into revolution. This initiation into the world of politics is

combined with her initiation into womanhood as she begins menstruation that night. Alvarez does this to extract politics out of male domain and make it a feminine space too. The youngest María Teresa joins the revolution with her sister as she finds romantic interest in her sister's fellow comrade. Patria's decision to reject her devout Catholic life and join the revolution happens after she witnessed the murder of a rebel. Dede, a meek figure surrounds herself with household chores and lives as a house wife.

The novel through the portrayal of women characters discusses the pertinent topic of the role of women in family and politics. The father of the sisters represents the patriarchal forces that oppress women. Papi, acts as an oppressive force that attempts to control his rebellious daughters from joining political activism. He tries to enforce male domination on his daughters and prevents them pursuing higher education and prohibits any romantic relationships. He treated his daughters as his property that he can make to function at his will. Catholicism functions as another oppressive force in the novel. Educated at convent boarding schools, the girls are taught by the nuns to be a proper "woman". The Imaculada Concepción of virginity was imposed on the students and rather than preparing them for higher studies, the schools groomed them to become perfect woman, wife and mother. Julia Alvarez situates her work within the private space of familial relationships to reveal the private and intimate violence endured by women. The patriarchal oppressive form of Caribbean culture is linked to its social and political aspects. The cruel regime of Trujillo subjugates its subjects to an extreme level that they are scared even to voice their thoughts within the safety of their home. Rafael Trujillo's patriarchal authority constricted the social life in the Dominican Republic, denying the civil and personal liberties of its citizens. His dictatorial power extended to the women of the society as seducing young women and keeping them as mistresses. As Minerva says "He's got many of them [mistresses], all over the island, set up in big fancy houses" (Alvarez 23).

Gendered form of violence is an important theme that the author portrays in the novel. Female body is presented as subject upon which multiple hegemonic forces act upon and leave indelible scars. The last half of the novel focuses on the treatment of the female political dissidents in Trujillo's prison cells. Minerva and Maria Teresa who are finally caught and imprisoned for their revolutionary involvement are incarcerated for a period of seven months. Alvarez dedicates several chapters to give a graphic description of the cruelties meted on the sisters. Incarcerated with twenty-four other women in a small prison cell, they were denied basic amenities and left malnourished. The cruel treatment at the prison breaks the mental health of many women leading to mental breakdowns. The sisters were kept in solitary confinements and tortured to give away the identities of other rebels. The ultimate form of state violence is represented through the final murder of the sisters by the state forces.

Julia Alvarez rather than limiting her novel to discussion on the domestic violence extends its significance by giving importance to the political aspect of gendered violence. Because of its portrayal of the violence caused by dictatorial political regime, Alvarez's work finds place among other significant writings with political themes. Because of this *In the Time of the Butterflies* has been labelled as a historical novel, fictionalized biography and historiographic metafiction. It can be also read as a political testimony of women who participated in the anti- Trujillo revolutions. Eminent scholar George Yúdice defines the testimonial nature of writing as "an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.)" (Yúdice 17). He further writes, "the testimonialista gives his or her personal testimony 'directly,' addressing a specific interlocutor" (Yúdice 15). This deeply subjective writing enables the "truth...[to be] summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history" (Yúdice 17).

The gringa dominicana to whom Dede narrates the history of her sisters, acts as the author's alter ego. The interest of the visitor in Las Mariposas prompts Dedé's to remember her sisters. The narration shifts in time to encompass the past of the sisters and the conversations of the listener and speaker in

the present. Alvarez reaches into the collective memory of the Dominican Republic to narrate a story of strife and violence. Though it centres on the Mirabal sisters, the novel pays tributes to hundreds of other martyrs who gave their life for the country, thus touching the shared sense of anxiety and fear lying deep within the unconscious of the generations.

In order to effectively represent the fear that Trujillo laid in the Dominican consciousness, Alvarez avoids the physical presence of the dictator in the novel. Instead, the pervading presence of his iron fist is always reminded creating the effect of a dark shadow that looms over the entire narration. This way of structuring helps to articulate the living reality of the people at that time, the fear of the presence of a danger that may befall them anytime from anywhere. Trujillo's authoritarianism is compared to the patriarchal authority of Papi. The father takes the role of a "sub-oppressor" (Alvarez 45), who also supported the dictator's rule. The father's extra marital affairs are compared to the licentious life of the dictator and the hypocrisy of the actions of both are drawn in the novel. So that the rebellion of the sisters is directed not just towards the state promoted oppression but a personal strife against the mistreatments and abuse faced at their home. The girls' rejection of the lessons they learned at the Catholic school is another level of rebellion against yet another oppressive force. Through the actions of the three Mirabal sisters, Alvarez questions the imposed gender roles on women, the social norms and expectations regarding women. Alvarez thus gives voice to the voiceless and carve out a niche for them to narrate their stories thus introduce them "into history as agents, out from under the shadows of... men" (Fergoso 6). This novel is also a feminist approach of a woman writing the story of women, shedding light into the unheard stories of her past. As Helen Cixous writes, "Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement" (Cixous 319).

The novel presents its women characters not just as victims of political oppression but of a society ridden with patriarchal values. As the eminent scholar Concepcion Bados Ciria writes, "The book challenges the traditional perception of Latin American women as politically passive, socially marginalized, voiceless, and submissive" (Ciria 311). Alvarez's choice of English as the language of writing is widely criticised but as Kelli Lyon Johnson comments: "By writing in English, Alvarez makes this fragment of Dominican history accessible to a wider audience, far greater outside Latin America" (Johnson 3). Constructing her novels in the form of testimonies Julia Alvarez is able to delve deep into the personal and intimate spaces of her female protagonists. It also enables her to easily touch the heart of her readers and engender a sympathy in the readers towards her characters. The voice of testimony thus blurs the line between the political and personal and validates the voice of even the minor character of the novel. It gives voice to the muffled cries of the marginalised Other of the society. As Mathew Mullins writes: "Such stories create a representative voice for victims of political violence and psychological terror who have been silenced. They seem necessary for the process of reburial and grieving and can promote healing and solidarity among disaffected groups and expand human capacity for empathy" (Mullins 4). In *The Time of the Butterflies* through its testimonial voice brings in front of the international a feminist historiographic metafiction that tells the traumatic tale of three sisters who sacrificed their lives for the nation.

Works Cited

- Alvarez, Julia. *In the Time of Butterflies*. San Francisco: California Press, 2005.
- Ciria, Concepción Bados. "In the Time of the Butterflies by Julia Alvarez: History, Fiction, Testimonio and the Dominican Republic". *Monographic Review*, Vol. 13, 1997, pp. 406-16.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Literature in the Modern World*, S. 316-326, 1990.
- Fergoso, R.L. "Julia Alvarez, *In The Time of the Butterflies*." *Reading U.S. Latina Writers*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 7-14, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403982254_2

Johnson, Kelli Lyon. *Julia Alvarez : Writing a New Place on the Map*. University of New Mexico Press, 2005.

Matthew Mullins (ed.), *Postmodernism in Pieces: Materializing the Social in U.S. Fiction*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Reed, Josephine. "Julia Alvarez". *National Endowment for the Arts*, 2010, <https://www.arts.gov/stories/podcast/julia-alvarez#transcript>.

Yúdice, G. "Testimonio and Postmodernism". *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1991, pp.15-31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X9101800302>.