
Mapping the Male Ego: A Comparative Study of Estaban Trueba in *The House of the Spirits* and Pedro Musquiz in *Like Water for Chocolate*

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Abstract

Being subjects of the higher order of life that extends beyond primitive means of sustenance, humans are designed to accustom themselves to the dynamic interrelations in society. Social interactions mould everyday life and are also instrumental in forming perceptions about the world. People are required to perform in multiple ways, and this gets them located in various subject positions. “Gender” and its implications as a social construct are of primary concern in this regard. Refined and reinterpreted over time, gender positively incorporates the possibilities for myriad levels of understanding associated with its practice. However, it is when people choose to selectively misconstrue gender roles that it becomes a problematic subject, thereby affecting the healthy existence of the male-female dichotomy in both personal and social spaces. Cultural conditioning and parental rearing are among the major factors that lead to the establishment of essentialist gender roles. Beginning with its base on the Freudian Psychoanalytic theory of male development, “masculinity” has come to be analysed from different standpoints by psychologists and literary theorists alike. In this paper, my attempt is to map the characteristics that outline the “masculinity” and “male ego” of the characters Esteban Trueba from *The House of the Spirits* and Pedro Musquiz from *Like Water for Chocolate*. Both the novels, though predominantly female-oriented, provide ample instances to explore the psyche of these not-so-minor male characters.

Keywords: Gender, Masculinity, Male Ego, Essentialism, Social Constructs

Contribution/Originality: This work tried to look at the factors which categorize the characters into the theorized and conditioned notions of masculinity, the ways in which their actions

symbolize the internalized "male ego", and also some of the notable deviations from the expected norms of male behaviour.

Introduction

Studies have developed around gender theories attempting to harp on the fluid and kaleidoscopic ways of interpreting the concept of gender. It was not until a few decades back that extensive studies on "masculinity" started to gain momentum, the word itself having entered the English language only by the middle of the eighteenth century. The "male ego" is a common understanding of the term that encapsulates a means of identification of the self and also as a condition imbibed by males through conventionally prescribed gender traits. It is associated with the traditional notions of masculinity which dictate how men should behave. These ideas are now being reconsidered, and theorists are trying to look at the softer aspects of masculinity and how performing it is often a burden for men. However, in the discussion of these two novels, I have abided by the conventional concept of masculinity and its manifestations through the characters of Esteban and Pedro, as the background of the novels is set at a time when discussions on gender roles and equality were hovering with high potential over all societies. Esteban Trueba is one of the narrators and a major character in the novel *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende. Pedro Muzquiz, from *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel, though does not appear as frequently in the novel as Trueba in the former, is nonetheless, a notable presence and influential character in the course of the novel.

The Concept of Male Ego

Esteban's childhood marked by utter poverty, his father's untimely death and an ill mother substantiate the aggressive masculine character that he later develops. According to theorists, unfulfilled parental love and bonding and the timely dissociation from each of the parents at the early stages of development result in the healthy development of masculinity in males. Michael J. Diamond, in his essay "Masculinity Unraveled", suggests- "the sense of masculinity or the male's self-image as a gendered being is far more complex and ambiguous

than maleness. It is fundamentally constructed out of the boy's early identifications with each of his parents, and, as I suggest, is reworked throughout his life" (Diamond, 2006, 1104).

Excessive masculine ideals are exhibited by Esteban in many instances, characterized by the relentless drive to amass wealth, self-exhibitionism, obsession and uncontrolled sexual passion. According to psychoanalytic theories on male development, this could be an aftermath of oedipal phase anxieties. "Disidentification from the mother, accompanied by complementary relation with father and subsequent identification of the ideal masculinity in him, are said to be the necessary factors that influence the development of a healthy masculinity" (Diamond, 2006, 1116). As can be clearly observed from the novel, Esteban is someone who has not experienced a pampered childhood but an impoverished one. Esteban's attachment with his sister was also not a lasting one and could not have compensated for the lost parental love. The novel points out Esteban's fierce masculinity right from his stoic demeanour to all his deeds.

Pedro's family is not adequately discussed in the novel, and therefore, in the act of mapping both the characters and their masculinity, the general cultural factors pertaining to the Latin American social setup could be taken as the converging point. Along with familial influences, the basic cultural background is also instrumental in deciding the moulding of gender roles. Taking the history of Latin America and gender conceptions that have developed therein, the notion of the "machismo" that constitutes "aggressiveness and hypersexuality in the male" (Ingoldsby 1991) forms the basis for analysis. Historically, Latin Americans tend to focus on this characteristic of overwhelming masculinity as a defining factor of the typical, conventional male. Ironically, they also idolize "familism"(Ingoldsby 1991) which places family ahead of individual interests and development. Though the two ideologies appear to be conflicting, if we examine the case of Trueba and Pedro, this seems explicable. Trueba follows his promise to financially provide for his sister Ferula until her death, though there isn't a proper emotional bond between them. Similarly, Pedro, too, does not abandon Rosaura though his intention is to get Tita. Therefore, this "familism" seems to arise from a sense of duty that is deeply embedded in the Latin American psyche. However, these two ideals are not conclusive in explaining the structure

of all families all the time. It is only a possible outcome concerning familial bonds devised along the lines prescribed by Latin American History.

The Culture of Latin America was also shaped largely by materialism. Both men and women had access to inheritance, and this allowed for a cultural transmission that was influenced by both the parental lineages. As Donna J.Guy puts it in her essay, "culture mirrored material life in Latin America" (Guy, 1994,6). Repercussions of this materialism can be seen in the lives of Pedro and Esteban. Industrialization, the progress of the agricultural economy and state bureaucracy were matters of concern when it came to the betterment of life. The ranches in the De La Garza family, Mama Elena's controlled maintenance and cautious calculations in the profitable use of the livestock indicate the value they placed on securing the material life.

Similarly, Esteban, right from his first trip to 'Tres Marias', has an obsession with wealth and is determined not to ever taste poverty again. "Esteban Trueba leaned back in the red velvet seat and felt deep gratitude to the British, who had had the foresight to build first-class cars in which one could travel like a gentleman without having to put up with chickens, baskets, string-tied bundles, and the howls of other people's children...He decided that from that day on, no matter how tight his circumstances, he would always pay for the small comforts that made him feel rich" (Allende, 1986, 62). Further, he takes up the role of the protector of Tres Marias and considers it his duty to civilize its inhabitants. "For the first time in his life, Esteban realized that the worst abandonment at Tres Marias was not of the land and animals but of the people, who had lived unprotected ever since his father had gambled away his mother's dowry and inheritance. He decided that it was time to bring a bit of civilization to this outpost hidden halfway between the mountains and the sea"(76). Taking up the role of the patron, Esteban imbibes the true nature of a colonizer exercising full control over the land and its tenants. This again brings out the Latin American sentiment of the "patronizing" male whose authority is not to be questioned. In fact, there is even a hierarchy among the same sex when it comes to exercising these powers. The males who belong to the lower classes are not privileged to enjoy these attributes of masculinity. They are in their own families, the ultimate patrons, but when it

comes to male-to-male interactions, the gender dynamics do not work in the same manner. There is a clear class and status division in even exercising the same gender roles.

Male Egotism in the Works

It is this ‘colonizer’s instinct’ that I find common to both the characters Esteban and Pedro. Esteban and Pedro are, in different ways, obsessed with what they want to possess. In the case of Pedro, his obsession lies in his endless pursuit of Tita. The different dimensions of Pedro’s wild passion could be applied to assess the drive for possession which is inherent in the character, which could also have become manifested in domains other than love had they been explored.

Possessiveness, when read along with its material nature, is a trait that mostly associates itself with the physicality of things. The urge to possess is part of human craving, which undoubtedly has its roots embedded in our material existence. Even a glimpse of Tita causes Pedro's feelings to brim up, and his heart skips a beat when he accidentally sees Tita’s breasts for the first time. Tita’s very presence incites the spark of desire in Pedro. “Pedro sitting in his hammock, was eating a watermelon and thinking of Tita. Having her so near made him feel a tremendous excitement. He couldn’t sleep thinking of her a few steps from him” (Esquivel, 1994, 43). When events take a different turn, and Tita says yes to her marriage with Dr John, Pedro's masculine instincts come to the fore. He becomes deprived of true belief in his sense of self and feels lost in his efforts to have Tita. The macho culture of Latin societies is such that in most cases, even the females want their men to be dominating and superior with valorous qualities. For instance, the man with whom Gertrudis runs away is military personnel. The female’s need for protection accentuates the need of the male to retain his virility.

The male ego works in such a way that it tends to compete in order to sustain and prove supremacy. In an article by Sharon Bird on “Homosociality and Hegemonic Masculinity”, she discusses the nature of male-to-male relationships or otherwise “homosociality” and how men try to establish a sort of hegemony in order to prove their masculinity when in front of other men. She says, “Competition with other men provides a stage for establishing both as an individual

and as appropriately masculine. Competition also contributes to the perpetuation of male dominance” (Bird,1996,8). This clearly states how the male ego is centred on the validation of the things they do.

Reading along these lines, Pedro seems to be competing with Dr John in his attempt to win back Tita. The involvement of Dr John with Tita creates insecurity in Pedro, which is linked both to his fear of losing Tita and also to the fear of his masculinity being challenged. This prompts him to act on the next available chance and finally take out his desire for Tita. This is Pedro's final attempt at winning Tita's heart back after all the abandonment that he did. Again he takes this out on Tita primarily out of his love for her. But I think it also buttresses the fact that this expression is considered to be very masculine and is, in fact, admired by the woman though it is forced on her. In this manner, Pedro seeks to re-establish his identity before Tita, at the same time giving a vent to his hurt masculine ideals. Sharon Bird, in her essay, further exhorts on the state of masculinity:

the social ideal for masculinity, which in itself is a non-static notion, may be internalized(that is central to one’s core self) or interiorized(acknowledged by the self), enabling individuals to understand the gender norms to which they are held accountable...non-hegemonic meanings of gender are hence, suppressed due to perceptions of “appropriate” masculinity (Bird,1996, 3).

Therefore, Pedro, in this context, could be seen as being unconsciously bound to the internalized notions of masculinity and is thereby made to act on it. The chances for him to ponder over those characteristics unique to him as an individual irrespective of his gender are diminished by these preconceived notions of masculinity. Mama Elena and her domineering presence as the matriarch of the house have already rendered Pedro powerless in his companionship with Tita. Elena’s death frees him from this invisible shackle but only to be replaced by a more severe one, that of John. This is when Pedro loses it all and decides to vent it out.

Esteban, as the epitome of individualism and material success, is markedly seen in several instances in the novel. In his choices regarding the modifications of the house post-

marriage, he rejects anything that is native. As the narration goes, "he wanted two or three heroic floors, rows of white columns, well-lit windows, the appearance of order and peace, beauty and civilization that was typical of foreign people and would be in tune with his new life. His house would be the reflection of himself, his family, and the prestige he planned to give his surname that his father had stained"(Allende,1986, 114-115). This urge for accomplishment stems from the masculine ideal for independence and a detachment from affectations. He fails to express emotions except for Clara, and this is closely associated with his tendency to maintain the gender hierarchy because emotional and expressive men are devalued, unlike the emotionally detached ones. However, towards the final stages of his life, Esteban compromises this insistence to a great extent.

His obsessive love for Clara is the one thing that weighs more than his rage and pride. Clara's insensitivity towards his ardent passion and her responses to his sensuality in the same casual manner as with other matters totally drains him out. Esteban embarks on sexual expeditions with multiple women in an attempt to quench his passion, but mostly it is his anger at Clara that he wants to douse.

However, he does not derive the satisfaction that he yearns for because it is not just the physical pleasure that he wants from Clara. His intent is to fully conquer her and the mystic deluge that she often falls into. He is disturbed by the fact that she relishes more these otherworldly affairs than in his companionship. Esteban finds it hard to tolerate Clara wanting something else more than him. This further becomes evident with his treatment of Ferula. Unable to bear the fondness that the two ladies share, Esteban throws Ferula out of the house.

Esteban, I feel, experiences a kind of inferiority that arises out of a lack of confidence in himself and his masculinity, in particular. The affairs he has outside wedlock could be viewed as desperate attempts to regain his virility. By and large, Esteban's character is in a constant and tiring quest to assert his dauntlessness and masculinity by achieving everything he desires.

Michael J. Diamond observes the occurrence of a phenomenon called "defensive phallicity" in his essay on masculinity (Diamond, 2006). This is the state where the feelings for

conquest and aggression as means of proving oneself tend to persist in an ageing man. According to the natural system, there should be a transformation from these feelings towards those of a more settled 'eros' and appreciation of life as men age. However, Esteban, I think, becomes an anomaly to some extent when this aspect is concerned. The changing dimensions of his masculinity seep in only a little later into his life. It is not until very late into his middle ages, after the death of Clara, that things slowly start to diminish in importance for him, although not much change is observed in his aggressiveness. "with the weight of age and politics, Tres Marias, like many other things that had once seemed essential, had ceased to interest him" (Allende 353). Till this time, which is much late in the novel, Esteban continues with his conquests and attempts to prove his worth, complementing the arguments related to the imbalance of male ego and masculinity in Esteban.

Esteban's concepts on gender roles are distinctly preconceived. He believes that the affair of the spirits is strictly feminine and despises its male practitioners. He agrees with Clara's charity work only in the aspect that it helps build the character of young ladies and wants Blanca to be married off well as he believes her destiny lies in that. He is surprised and quite annoyed at Clara's disinterest in setting up the house and her lack of enthusiasm at seeing all the exported furniture, which he thinks would have enticed any woman. These gender imprints are large and deeply etched that it impacts everything that Esteban thinks and does. He is also unhappy with the nonchalant attire of Amanda, Nicholas's girlfriend and does not appreciate her presence in the house. This is quite expected from Esteban because of the basic makeup of his character, which is very conservative and orthodox.

Esteban's young adulthood marked by ferocious and wild sexual escapades is, in a sense, a reflection of these rooted gender constructs. This is accentuated by his assertion of superiority and dominance over everything he considers subordinate to him. His exploitation of the peasant women and the illegitimate children he thus, begets, he considers as nothing more than a part of the routine at Tres Marias. Adding to this are the pleasurable frequent visits to Transito Soto. Such arrogance and toxic machismo are fostered by Esteban during his early adulthood. Very late into his old age, these violent sojourns subside after the birth of his granddaughter Alba.

While analyzing the characters Esteban and Pedro, Pedro seems to be more of a layman who gets caught up and enmeshed in a strong matriarchal household. Esteban, on the other hand, is a graver character who holds many responsibilities-both in the domestic and public spheres. But when it comes to love, both the characters are found to be determined and steadfast in their feelings. Pedro's decisions are solely based on his love for Tita, and though Esteban involves in multiple affairs even while in his marriage, he is devoted only to Clara.

Another significant parallel lies in the fact that the lives of both the characters revolve around strong female characters. There is an infusion of the similarities and polarities in gender that surprisingly coexist despite some problematic interludes in the course of events. The novels, in this manner, provide scope for massive excavations into character studies and introspective research into pre-determined notions of gender differences. Allende confesses in one of her interviews that it is by portraying her husband as one of her characters in a novel that she came to recognize, experience and empathise with the predicaments of being of the opposite gender.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to bring up some of the hypotheses made by Gutman in his psychological findings on differences in gender experiences. He hypothesizes that in the masculine world, "others are a class of objects to be tested and identified as such, whereas in the feminine world, the self-derives its definitions from the groupings to which it belongs" (Carlson,1970, 4). He goes on to add that "Basically, males differentiate self from milieu, while females experience themselves as an intrinsic part of the milieu" (Carlson,1970,4). I think it is important to assimilate these aspects in trying to understand the concepts of masculinity and femininity.

Though the characters discussed here could be categorized into specific traits, the reasons behind such a possible mapping also need to be studied. The basic psychological setup demands a certain kind of social behaviour that comes naturally to both genders. It is an overlapping of these inherent traits with forced social norms that need to be eliminated. Individual deviations and experiences specific to each gender need to be considered and given space even if they do

not fit into the 'prescribed norms'. And as I have already mentioned, cultural factors also play decisive roles in shaping particular gender identities. A comprehensive understanding of all these aspects is what I think would ultimately yield unbiased perceptions of gender roles, both in literature and real life.

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