

# Storytelling as Subsistence Strategy: The Literary and the Political in Isabel Allende's *Eva Luna*

A. Vanitha\*

Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English, Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), Erode, Tamil Nadu, India; vanlitnet@yahoo.com

## Abstract

Storytelling in postcolonial fiction is all about reliving the forgotten or erased past thereby preserving and repossessing it. The novel *Eva Luna* narrates the story of Eva Luna, who is endowed with an intuitive potential of entertaining and nourishing people by her stories each of which she generates in no time piecing together shards of her past with slivers of her imagination. Like most of the woman protagonists of Isabel Allende's fiction, Eva Luna is a storyteller who has a flair for animating the past through her stories and in so doing nurtures the present. Through her stories, she not only records history but also fortifies the inseparable ancestral bonds which thwart the oppressed and the marginalized from extinction in a country – perceivably Latin America - torn asunder by political upheavals. Subjected to the manifold hegemony of the church, the state and the military, which are the mainstays of patriarchy, Eva Luna's stories work towards a rememory of the past and reclamation of her lost world which had been snatched away from her and her mother from whom she has inherited the legacy of storytelling.

**Keywords:** Logocentric, Masochism, Meta-Narrative, Monocracy, Pastiche, Phonocentric, Raconteur, Scheherazade

## 1. Introduction

The inclusion of oral storytelling feature in fiction is an offshoot of postmodern fiction, the narratology of which is typified by pastiche, parody, multiple points-of-view, non-linearity, ambiguity, binary erasures, metanarratives etc., Stories in postmodern fiction are means to make sense of the chaotic and fragmented contemporary world torn by conflicts – both internal and external. Orally communicated stories are community-based and that is why David Boje asserts, "Stories are not indicators, they are the organization" (269)<sup>2</sup>. Literature originates from the indigenous oral storytelling which has traversed through generations and has assumed the written form. So it is given to understand that human beings are hardwired for storytelling through which they not only discover their individual and collective identity but also interpret their community and environment in terms of it.

## 2. An Effective Narrative Strategy

In a place of absolute hegemony and hierarchy, storytelling is a discreet device used by the postmodern writers to reach unbiased pronouncements and predictions. Its phonocentric basis throws open the doors to articulation by the indigenous population leading to the incorporation of multiple points of view and wide-ranging interpretative possibilities. As a postmodern narrative strategy to voice the voiceless, storytelling is more effective in exerting its influence to meet political ends than by any other experiential means as Farber and Sherry explicate:

Because the scholarship of women and people of colour reflects their distinct knowledge (gained from listening to and telling stories), the radical multiculturalists argue, it cannot be judged or tested by traditional standards. Instead, they imply, it should be judged according to its political effect: it should be judged 'in terms of its ability to

\*Author for correspondence

advance the interests of the outsider community,' because 'outsider scholarship is often aimed not at understanding the law, but at changing it.' (162)<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. Eva's Inheritance of the Legacy of Storytelling

Born in an enchanted land "where time is bent and distances deceive the human mind" (EL 2)<sup>1</sup>, Eva Luna's mother Consuelo is a foundling discovered by the missionaries who grows up in the strict hierarchy of the Mission and then in the Convent of the nuns. She nurtures an instinctive hatred for the religious autocracy prevalent there and she has to struggle hard to stifle the astonishing flow of stories she possesses – an inherent gift which surfaces only after Eva Luna is born. Later, she serves a foreign doctor named Jones who has evolved a system to preserve the dead. When the dark Indian gardener employed by the doctor is bitten by a highly venomous snake and is about to die, Consuelo resolves to gratify him by offering herself and that is how Eva Luna is born. Outwardly taciturn, Consuelo uncovers her treasure trove of stories drawing from her past when she and Eva are left alone. Eva is continually nurtured by her mother's stories which remain fresh in her memory so much so that even in her later years she confronts and condones the untoward happenings in her life by resorting to storytelling, piecing together shards of Consuelo's stories. Besides this, the stories also imply the magical facet of reality which always makes life endurable.

She manufactures the substance of her own dreams, and from those materials constructed a world for me... She sowed in my mind the idea that reality is not only what we see on the surface; it has a magical dimension as well, and, if we so desire, it is legitimate to enhance it and color it to make our journey through life less trying. (EL 22)<sup>1</sup>.

This gives wings to Eva's unfettered imagination despite being confined in the doctor's mansion and she moulds time and space at will by circumnavigating the earth and living with the characters of her and her mother's stories.

### 4. Stories as Solace to Disillusionment

Reality takes unpremeditated dimensions when life itself is unstable and chaotic with no sure foothold to cling upon for support. The first and the second world wars and their gruesome consequences had thrown the masses into a mire of disillusionment when they realized the glory-turned-tragedy of the wars. This has challenged the idea

of reality as a constant entity for the doubly marginalized people, specifically women who are discriminated by both race and gender. The childhood of Eva's lover Rolf Carlo, a reporter of the riots against dictatorship, is miserable as he and his family undergo unutterable ordeals in the hands of his perverted and autocratic father who tortures his wife by his weird impositions. The only sustenance Carlo's mother hangs on to is God – her only reality – which proves futile by failing to provide succour or solace to her quandary. Madrina, Eva's employer, relies upon the miracles of the Catholic saints and her preconceived idea of goodness and finally ends up in lunacy. Doctor Jones, who is disillusioned with science and his inventions when on his death bed, dies peacefully on hearing Eva's narratives. This sheds light on the curative and transformative power of storytelling.

### 5. Eva's Imaginative Flights

When Eva Luna is placed in the overbearing regimen of the Patrona, she offers her resistance by gazing at the painting which displays a seascape and by taking an imaginative plunge into the deep waters to explore imaginary worlds and creatures. She scalps the Patrona for punishing her for being idle and runs away. She meets Huberto Naronjo, who scratches his living through petty thievery and who has an unshakable idea about the virility of being a man. As a means of paying him for his favours, Eva offers him stories spun from what she had heard on the radio, the ballads she knows and her past experiences. One is about a maiden, who vainly falls in love with an unscrupulous outlaw, and later takes care of the orphans created by his killing spree. Unable to withstand his turbulent visits, the maiden decides to resist his ruthlessness. She turns her house into an ice cream parlour and a place for entertainment and when in his next visit the outlaw finds that all are happy and no one is frightened of him, he goes from the place feeling utterly defeated. Plausibly so, storytelling advocates resistance to callousness coercions.

Unconsciously, Eva Luna defies the political and gendered hegemony by spinning tales which helps her to cope up with her lot. As she grows up, she weaves the elements of love and passion in her stories. When Eva is employed in the colonial mansion of the Cabinet Minister, her imagination is triggered on finding so many locked rooms because according to her, empty rooms provide ample scope to invent hidden worlds. She accrues strange and out-of-the-world ingredients for her stories from the closed doors and builds extraordinary stories out of them. This fosters and fortifies her inventive faculty offering her extensive prospects in buttressing the indomitable spirit lurking in her

to survive and succeed in the repressive domain of power politics she is living in.

## 6. Eva as Scheherazade

The art of storytelling has democratic origins and autonomous leanings and stories, by and large, come from the marginalized and are community-based. The meanings conveyed by stories change over time as we find the stories narrated by Eva Luna metamorphose into different dimensions and magnitude in the course of the novel. She also selects, alters and revises the import carried by the stories contextually. The stories told by her cannot be interpreted in terms of the individual storyteller but acquire meaning only when they are perceived as a part of the collective political, racial and gendered history of the community.

As Robert Kroetsch says, "We haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. Fiction makes us real" (63)<sup>4</sup>, Isabel Allende employs oral storytelling as a survival strategy to recuperate the past for her people enabling them to learn from it and to lend meaning to their current precarious existence. In *A Thousand and One Tales of the Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade is destined to tell stories to rescue herself from being beheaded. In parallel terms, Eva Luna's concoction of stories is a survival strategy which indicates that storytelling is an indispensable facet of her life and that phonocentric narration is more potent than logocentric communication. In *Agua Santa*, Riad Halabi gifts Eva Luna with volumes of *Thousand and One Tales of the Arabian Nights*, which she rapturously devours and in turn, narrates them to Zulema, Halabi's wife, by transforming the characters and the anecdotes with her unique colouring of imagination. One of the infinite possibilities promised by Eva's imaginative narratives is Zulema's sudden spurt of Spanish speaking. Eva is elated by this prospect of storytelling and says:

In the motionless sands my stories germinated, every birth, death, and happening depends on me. I could plant anything I wanted in those sands; I had only to speak the right word to give it life. At times I felt that the universe fabricated from the power of imagination had stronger and more lasting contours than the blurred realm of the flesh-and-blood creatures around me. (EL 188)<sup>1</sup>.

## 7. The Universality of Eva's Stories

Eva Luna's stories present to the listeners the intricate and complex relationships of humankind such as husbands, wives, siblings, children etc., wherein is involved oedipic, platonic, romantic and sexual love. Furthermore, power in

terms of political, social, racial and sexual relationships and its violence and violations are deeply explored. The masochism of Lucas Carle, the tyranny of El Benefactor and the monocacy of the Church - also their ruin and tragic ending - are alluded in Eva's stories. Eva's stories are timeless and universal in the sense that the country in which the events happen is unspecified. This shows that the happenings in the stories narrated by her are likely to take place anywhere and anytime speaking for their universality. Also, the lives of the people described in the stories remain untouched by any new-fangled idea as it is reckoned as alien and intrusive which can jeopardize their pristine way of living.

In the novel, Huberto Naronjo, Rolf Carle, Melesio and Elvira are the listeners of Eva's narratives who make their presence conspicuous by their unwitting role and perspectives in the meaning-making processes. Thus, it can be perceived that defying the objective reality of the autocratic chaos-driven world she inhabits, Eva has constructed a new reality of optimism, regeneration and empowerment by being a raconteur. Finally, Eva resolves to script all the stories she had heard from her mother and she herself recounted. She remembers the events which had happened long before and also men and women who had influenced her past. As their lives are now in her hands, she says: "Little by little, the past was transformed into the present, and the future was also mine; the dead came alive with the illusion of eternity; those who have been separated were reunited, and all that had been lost in oblivion regained precise dimensions" (EL 252)<sup>1</sup>. Yet she struggles to fabricate an ending and it seems that her narrative will end only with her death. She also feels that she is one of the characters having the prowess to determine her life and mould it. When Eva comes to know how Rolf Carle is filled with angst owing to his sister Katherina's death, she invents an easeful and peaceful death for her through her storytelling potential. At the jungle of guerillas, Rolf Carle, the man Eva loves fervently, asks her to spin a story for him. She tells him the story of a woman who sells her past to a soldier and finally finds herself merging with him. The woman is Eva herself and Rolf is the soldier.

## 8. Conclusion

Narrating from the margins, Eva Luna brings to the centre the significance of storytelling as a strategy for expressing the self in topography where she and her people are subjected to the coercions of dictatorship and where even democracy becomes patriarchal autocracy. Isabel Allende has exploited storytelling as an effective tool to execute the twofold role of her fiction by being both literary and politi-

cal and to bridge the gap between them. Thus, the exiled Chilean writer has integrated oral storytelling elements in her fiction not to offer an answer to the racial, political, religious and patriarchal hegemony prevalent in Latin America in particular and the colonized nations in general, but to celebrate the healing potential of narration for its prospect to sustain and enlighten the present by the past as Eva Luna claims, "it allows me to escape to other worlds when reality became too difficult to bear" (EL 212).

## 9. References

---

1. Allende, Isabel. *Eva Luna*. New York: Dial Press; 1987. PMID:PMC304199
2. Boje D. Storytelling in Organizational Theory. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. 1998; 36.
3. Farber D, Suzanna S. *Beyond All Reason: The Radical Assault on Truth in American Law*. Oxford: Oxford UP; 1997.
4. Kroetsch, R. *Creation*. Toronto: New Press; 1970.