

Resilience and Resistance of Women in Isabel Allende's *The Japanese Lover*

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Abstract

Isabel Allende is a Chilean-American writer known for her works of magical realism and historical fiction. Her novel *The Japanese Lover* provides a compelling portrayal of female characters navigating love, societal expectations, and personal hardships across several decades. This paper examines how Allende's feminist perspective and personal experiences shape her depiction of women, particularly through the protagonist, Alma Belasco. Set against the backdrop of World War II and the incarceration of Japanese Americans, the novel highlights themes of love, exile, identity, and aging. Through the experiences of Alma, Irina Bazili, and Lillian Belasco, Allende sheds light on the oppression women faced due to rigid gender norms, economic hardships, racial discrimination, and wartime displacement.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Historical Trauma, Love, Marginalized Women, Resilience

Literature has been a powerful medium for exploring the roles, struggles and resilience of women across different historical and cultural settings. The novel *The Japanese Lover* present a compelling portrayal of women navigating love, social expectations and personal hardships over several decades. As a feminism-focused writer, Allende frequently depicts women as tenacious, self-sufficient, and formed by personal and historical conflicts. Through Alma Belasco, the protagonist of *The Japanese Lover*, she tackles themes of love, exile, aging, and identity. The novel is set during World War II and the incarceration of Japanese Americans in the United States. This illustrates Allende's interest in forgotten or disadvantaged histories, particularly how they affected women. Allende has stated in interviews that several of her writings are inspired by chats with others who have gone through comparable circumstances. In an article titled "The Japanese Lover by Isabel Allende," *The Harvard Crimson* commended Allende's handling of complex themes, stating that she "handles such weighty themes with an experienced hand," delivering "difficult moments with a quiet resonance that permeates the novel's nuanced relationships."

The novel takes place predominantly between the 1930s and the present, when

women's duties were largely determined by patriarchal organizations. In the early twentieth century, women were expected to marry well, be dutiful spouses, and prioritize family life. They had little flexibility to make personal decisions, and society frequently evaluated them based on their marital status and behaviour. Traditional gender roles were firmly established during this time. Women were supposed to be loving moms, obedient daughters, and loyal spouses. Their main responsibilities were to support their spouses, run the home, and raise the kids. There were few options for education and employment, and anyone who wanted to work outside the house sometimes encountered discrimination. The capacity of a woman to get married successfully and have a decent family life was a major factor in determining her value.

Women suffered greatly during World War II and other battles during that era. Due to war, many were compelled to flee their homes and sought refuge in other countries, where they battled for survival. In areas devastated by conflict, women had to deal with malnutrition, violence, and the ongoing threat of losing their family. Furthermore, because of their race or ethnicity, some women were sent to detention camps or compelled to work. They endured difficult living circumstances, being away from their loved ones, and lifelong emotional damage.

Women were paid far less than men and frequently put in low-status positions like caregiving, manufacturing work, or household chores. Many women managed domestic duties while working long hours in unfavorable conditions. In order to survive, people without financial support frequently had to put up with severe treatment from their employers or resort to drastic means. It was difficult for women to overcome poverty because they were sometimes humiliated or shunned when they desired independence. Although sexual abuse and domestic violence were common, they were rarely openly discussed. Because it was socially unacceptable to leave an abusive marriage or to speak out against strong individuals, many women endured in silence. Victims have few options and scant legal protections. Many were forced into unsatisfactory and even dangerous partnerships because divorce was frequently out of the question. People who disobeyed these norms ran the risk of facing punishment from their communities or disownment from their relatives.

For women, the early to mid-20th century was a very difficult period. Many were compelled to suffer quietly, while others were able to escape social restraints. Economic hardship, war, racial prejudice, brutality, and rigid gender norms were all forms of oppression

they had to deal with. Women showed incredible fortitude in the face of these obstacles, setting the groundwork for later generations to struggle for freedom and equality. At the heart of the novel *The Japanese Lover* had a strong female characters who navigate complex personal and historical challenges. The three main women Alma Belasco, Irina Bazili, and Lillian Belasco have distinct journeys that explore themes of love, sacrifice, survival, and self-discovery. Their stories show women's problems and talents, contributing much to the novel's emotional depth.

Alma Belasco is the main female character in the novel. Born in Poland, she is sent to San Francisco as a kid to avoid the horrors of World War II. She grows up in the wealthy Belasco family, where she enjoys a life of privilege while simultaneously feeling like an outsider. Despite her guarded demeanor, Alma is passionate and independent, willing to forge her own path rather than submit to societal expectations. Her romantic relationship with Ichimei Fukuda, the son of a Japanese gardener, becomes a defining feature of her life. Their relationship is characterized by great affection, but it is tested by society conventions and historical events, particularly the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Even though Alma marries Nathaniel Belasco, her feelings for Ichimei never diminish. She chooses to keep their relationship a secret, violating social standards in her own manner. Alma's character portrays a woman who makes difficult decisions, balancing love and duty while being loyal to herself. She is also a successful artist and businesswoman, demonstrating her perseverance and capacity to survive independently. Even in her old age, she refuses to rely on her family, opting instead to live in Lark House, a senior facility.

Irina Bazili, a young Moldovan immigrant, is another important female character. She works as a caregiver at Lark House and establishes a close friendship with Alma and her grandson, Seth. Irina is sweet, diligent, and dedicated, yet she has unpleasant memories of her past. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that she was a victim of human trafficking and abuse during her childhood. These horrific experiences have made her wary and scared of emotional closeness. Despite this, Irina establishes a new life for herself in San Francisco, seeking stability and security. Seth falls in love with her and attempts to help her open her heart, but Irina is unable to let go of her old anxieties. Allende uses Irina's trip to examine themes of pain and healing. Although Lillian is a member of the affluent class, she is conscious of societal disparities and strives to assist Alma in making her own decisions. She exemplifies a generation of women who navigated stringent social constraints while yet

finding methods to advise and protect their families.

Alma's journey reflects the challenges of balancing passion and duty, self-expression and societal expectations, making her one of Allende's most compelling female protagonists. Born into a wealthy Jewish family in Poland, she is sent to San Francisco as a child to escape the dangers of World War II, and she grows up in the Belasco household, a prestigious and privileged environment that offers her security but also imposes certain expectations. While Alma appreciates the love and care of her relatives, she never fully conforms to the traditional roles assigned to women of her time. She is independent in her thoughts and actions, refusing to be defined by marriage or societal approval. "She learned to bear her troubles alone and with dignity, convinced no one was interested in other people's problems, and that pain borne in silence eventually evaporated" (40).

One of the defining aspects of Alma's life is her relationship with Ichimei Fukuda, the son of the family's Japanese gardener. "She was eight she had fallen in love with ichimei with all the intensity of childhood passions" (132). Their love story is passionate but forbidden due to racial and social barriers. During World War II, Ichimei and his family are sent to an internment camp, a cruel reality that separates them. Although Alma deeply loves Ichimei, she does not choose to marry him, understanding the limitations society places on their relationship. Instead, she enters a marriage of convenience with Nathaniel Belasco, her childhood friend. Their marriage is based on mutual respect and companionship rather than romantic love, as Nathaniel is secretly homosexual. This unconventional arrangement reflects Alma's independent mindset, she refuses to be controlled by emotions alone and makes choices that allow her to live life on her own terms.

Despite her marriage, Alma continues her secret affair with Ichimei throughout her life. Their love remains strong, "She was ten when they where separated, promising to stay together in their thoughts and by writing; eleven when his letters started drying up; and twelve when the distance between them became insuperable and she resigned herself to losing Ichimei" (131). "Our relationship is still secret" (172) but Alma insists on keeping it hidden. This decision shows the contradictions in her character. While she defies conventions in many ways, she also adheres to certain social norms, choosing secrecy over open rebellion. She values her independence and does not want to be bound by expectations, yet she also fears losing the life she has built. This internal conflict makes her a deeply human and complex character. "Alma showed herself to be an imaginative storyteller; (73)

Alma's independence extends beyond her romantic life. She is a talented artist and later becomes a successful businesswoman, proving her ability to stand on her own. She does not rely on anyone for financial security, which was unusual for women of her time. Even in old age, she chooses to live at Lark House, a senior residence, rather than depend on her family. Her decision symbolizes her lifelong commitment to self-sufficiency and personal freedom. She is a woman who makes difficult choices, sometimes sacrificing personal happiness for practicality and independence. She is passionate yet restrained, rebellious yet cautious. Through her character, Allende explores the complexities of love, duty, and identity. Alma's life is a testament to the strength of women who carve their own paths in a world that often seeks to confine them. Her character remains unforgettable as she embodies the struggles and triumphs of a woman determined to live life on her own terms.

Throughout the novel, Alma's choices challenge traditional gender roles, making her a symbol of autonomy and self-determination. Despite experiencing love, loss, and the constraints of societal expectations, she remains steadfast in her pursuit of personal freedom. Her story ultimately underscores the novel's themes of love, identity, and the passage of time, reinforcing her legacy as a woman who lived life on her own terms. Through Alma Belasco, Allende offers a compelling portrait of a woman whose complexity and independence make her unforgettable.

Irina Bazili is introduced as a hardworking and dedicated young woman who works at Lark House, a retirement home. "Irina Bazili began working at Lark House in 2010, she was twenty three years old" (1). She is kind, efficient, and well-liked by the residents, especially Alma Belasco and her grandson, Seth. Despite her cheerful personality, Irina keeps her past a secret. She avoids close relationships and is afraid of love and intimacy. Her independence is one of her strongest qualities. Unlike Seth, who comes from a privileged background, Irina has had to struggle for everything she has. She works multiple jobs and refuses to rely on others for financial support. This reflects the reality of many women in society who must work hard to survive, often without help.

"Irina's secret was in fact more complicated: to her each one of the Lark House residents was a replica of her grandparents" (103). Irina's determination to create a better life for herself, despite her past trauma, shows her strength. She represents women who refuse to be defined by their past and instead fight for a future on their own terms. One of the central themes in *The Japanese Lover* is how women often suffer in silence. Irina's past is filled with

pain she was a victim of abuse and human trafficking. These experiences have shaped her fear of men and her reluctance to trust others.

“‘One girl threw herself out of a third – floor window and was left half paralyzed, but she still had to keep working,’ Radmila told Irina in the half-melodramatic, half-didactic tone she used to refer to this wretched episode in her life” (106). Irina’s story highlights the harsh realities faced by many women around the world. Abuse, violence, and exploitation are problems that women often experience, but society does not always acknowledge them. By keeping her past hidden, Irina represents the countless women who suffer alone, afraid of judgment or rejection. However, the novel also shows that healing is possible. Through her friendship with Alma and her growing relationship with Seth, Irina slowly learns to trust again. “As time went by, the relationship between Alma and Irina became increasingly like that of aunt and niece” (59). This suggests that while women face great challenges, they can find support and strength in their relationships with others.

Throughout history, women have been expected to marry and dedicate their lives to their husbands and families. In *The Japanese Lover*, Irina challenges these expectations. She refuses to rush into a relationship with Seth, even though he loves her deeply. Her past trauma makes her hesitant, but she also values her independence and fears losing control over her life. Irina’s reluctance to commit immediately to a romantic relationship is important because it highlights a modern perspective on women’s roles. Many women today are choosing careers, self-growth, and personal happiness over traditional expectations of marriage. Irina, like Alma, shows that women can live fulfilling lives without being defined by their relationships with men.

Irina’s journey is about breaking free from the chains of her past. For years, she has lived in fear, believing that her history will always define her. However, as she opens up to Alma and Seth, she realizes that she has the power to change her life. Her growth represents the resilience of women who have faced hardships but refuse to be defeated by them. She chooses to embrace her future rather than let her past control her. This message is important in the context of women’s roles in society—Irina proves that women are not victims of their circumstances but survivors who can shape their own destinies. Irina’s journey shows that women can overcome even the most painful pasts and build their own futures. Her independence, resilience, and eventual acceptance of love and trust make her an inspiring character. The novel emphasizes that while women often face difficult challenges, they also

have the strength to rise above them and create their own paths. Ultimately, Irina Bazili is not just a survivor—she is a symbol of hope, proving that women have the power to define their own lives, regardless of the obstacles they face.

When Alma forms a marriage of convenience with Nathaniel Belasco, whom she admires but does not romantically adore. Their marriage gives stability and safety, allowing Alma to preserve her social status. Nathaniel, who is secretly homosexual, also benefits from the arrangement because it helps him to avoid social stigma. Their relationship is founded on companionship rather than passion, demonstrating how marriage can often be more about stability than love. Alma's decision underscores the constraints that women frequently experience to obey social norms rather than their feelings. While she maintains her secret love with Ichimei, she lives within societal norms, demonstrating the delicate balance between passion and duty.

Irina Bazili's relationship with love is completely different from Alma's. Alma embraces her secret passion, whilst Irina is afraid of love due to past tragedy. She comes from a past of violence and human trafficking, which has severely harmed her capacity to trust and build meaningful relationships. Even when Alma's grandson, Seth, falls in love with her and offers her a stable and caring future, she is hesitant. Unlike Alma, who risked everything for love, Irina avoids it, believing that it will only cause her sorrow. Her struggle symbolizes the long-term impact of trauma and the difficulties of accepting love after enduring pain.

Despite their differing backgrounds, Alma and Irina demonstrate that love is not always simple. Society frequently specifies who women should love and marry, but personal experiences and feelings may not always follow these guidelines. Alma chooses to live a double life, meeting social expectations through marriage while concealing her genuine desire. Irina, on the other hand, defends herself by avoiding love completely. Both women make decisions based on their circumstances, demonstrating that love is influenced by both external pressures and internal feelings. Similarly, Irina gradually learns to accept love despite her tragic history, demonstrating that healing is achievable with time. The novel challenges the notion that love must adhere to standard schedules or expectations. Instead, it portrays love as something fluid, capable of lasting beyond the constraints that society imposes.

Isabel Allende portrays women's love and marriage decisions as deeply personal

while impacted by external forces. Alma's decision to marry Nathaniel is influenced by social norms, familial pressure, and time constraints. Her secret affair with Ichimei is an act of rebellion, a method for her to regain her right to love despite the restrictions imposed on her. Irina's first rejection of love was a sort of self-protection, but as she recovers, she understands she has the ability to choose love on her terms. Through these characters, Allende indicates that, while society may attempt to dictate women's love and marriage decisions, women ultimately have the right to define love for themselves.

In *The Japanese Lover*, love is depicted as a source of both joy and agony, freedom and constraint. Women in the novel must balance following their hearts and satisfying society's expectations. Alma and Irina's experiences show the challenges that women encounter when deciding between passion and security, trust and fear, tradition and personal independence. Allende's work argues that, while external factors shape love, it remains a very personal experience, demonstrating that women, despite cultural pressures, can determine their own pathways in love and life.

Works Cited

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