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## The Mother of a Revolution

Margaret Cox  
mcox25@liberty.edu

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Maggie Cox

Mrs. Towles

ENGL 306

*In the Time of Butterflies*

### The Mother of a Revolution

Julia Alvarez's novel, *In the Time of Butterflies*, is not confined to a single voice. Instead, her writing affords each sister her perspective of not only the political revolution, but also each woman's own personal growth. Each sister experiences her own life in the similar stages of school, romance, and actualizing her own place in society, yet the particular voice of Patria, the oldest Mirabal sister, through religiously poetic prose paired with her unique motivations to join the revolution create the tone of a complex, powerful Latina woman. Through the contrast of Patria's personality and perspective, Alvarez creates a unified harmony between elements sensual feminine power and the unique ability for women to gain more through loss.

The intentionally female narration of the novel creates an empowerment that typical historical narratives lack for women, especially for wives and mothers like Patria. Each sister speaks through the pages of Alvarez's novel, even Dede, who did not actively participate in the actual assassination plot. By including her perspective, Alvarez recognizes the significance of all women who have been witnesses to any history; each one has her own story to tell. Even more significantly, the history of the Dominican Republic itself is given new life because "the parameters that determine national identity ...traditionally exclude women" (Ink). Through structurally establishing the novel to validate each woman's narrative, Alvarez grants the inclusion voice of a women life Patria, who is neither an activist like Minerva nor a romantic like Mate. Patria's character, more than the actual historical woman, represents the majority of

women in the Dominican Republic as well as in the Latina world who become primarily wives and mothers. Her empowerment in particular matters in “renegotiating the masculinized national identity... inherited from imperialism,” (Ink) because the real women whom she emulates have their own stories to tell should they be given the same voice or revolutionary opportunities as Patria. Being a mother and a wife increases the significance of her role as a narrator in the novel as she gives voice to the majority of overlooked Latinas who make up so much of history.

Alvarez’s intentionally structured novel bounces between the women’s shared timelines so that each woman’s point of view emphasizes their character yet Patria’s narrative provides the richest narrative of an empowered woman. Minerva records her experiences in first-person, where an informal swagger first colors her younger narrative until giving way to a reflective tone once she has been put under house arrest. Yet despite fighting for the rights of her countrywomen and emphasizing women’s advancement through political action, Minerva undercuts her own stance as a powerful woman by not only minimizing the inclusion of domestic life in her narrative, but also by predetermining in childhood that she will be, at whatever the cost, a woman of influence. Meanwhile, “each of Patria’s chapters is temporally unified and highly episodic,” (Rich) enriching her perspective with beauty that does not shy away from the harsh reality around her. Ultimately, Patria, through her poetic and overtly stylized first-person account, who influences the world around her because of the particular woman whom she becomes. Her poetic first person account shows how she helped overturned the world of Trujillo’s regime through her defined femininity, not in spite of it.

As the oldest of the four sisters, Patria learned how to speak up for others and herself as her own woman even before Minerva attempted to create a place for women in the political world. Leadership as a woman within both a politically and culturally patriarchal society was

highly marginalized, yet if she had become a nun, Patria would have been in a position to impact the lives of those around her. Though she never expressed a desire to be a revolutionist in the same way that Minerva dreamed in their childhood, Patria would have been equipped to help change the lives of the oppressed and marginalized. Instead she learns to affect change through her own sensuality as a wife. Later, as her role in the family centers on her children, Patria discovers even more of her own strength through protecting and raising them. Even before officially becoming a *mariposa*, she “constantly thinks of and attends to her children, husband, and sisters, [so that later her] confessions of fear and hope for the movement are continuously interwoven with concerns and affectionate comments about her family” (Rich). Patria consistently acts from her motivation to love others. Through her marriage and mothering, Patria grows into a woman with the ability to stand up for others as well as herself before she ever stands up for political justice.

Alvarez’s writing unifies the often falsely dichotomized nature of a woman’s sexuality with her fertility and with her role as a mother through Patria’s personal motivations. The nature of a woman as sensual is generally pitted against the nature of motherhood despite the inherent links between the two aspects of a woman’s personhood yet Patria comfortably inhabits both. Latina women hold the dangerous dichotomies of the two overarching societal expectations of being at once pure and sensual. While the Dominican cultural narrative lacks the oversimplified archetypal Chicana figures of La Malinche and La Virgen, young Patria herself acknowledges that “there was a struggle, but no one could tell” (Alvarez 47) between her growing sexual awareness and her desire to fulfil the righteous requirements of a nun. She cannot focus on her prayers when the flame tree just outside the convent window is tossed by an oncoming storm; despite “the pains [she] took in keeping [her] back straight in early mass,” (Alvarez 45). Patria

chose to give her soon -to-be husband “a beatific smile,” (Alvarez 48) and at age sixteen, announces her decision to best fulfill the will of God through marriage rather than abstaining from it. This decision eliminates the social connotations of a loose woman as Patria’s sexual desires are properly framed within the context of marriage and, shortly after, motherhood. Unlike many “young women [often] fall in the trap of performing themselves how they are seen,” (Ramírez), Patria acts in the confidence of a young woman who knows what she wants and simply pursues that without regard nor impropriety for social standards around her. Despite Patria’s own internal reflections of struggling against her sexual identity, Alvarez leaves no room a division between these two female areas of power.

As the chaos of El Jefe’s regime increases, Patria’s private life experiences its own upheaval at the loss of her third child and the following doubts she experiences in her faith. Shortly after, she privately wrestles with the evil she so plainly observes in the political murders and familial losses when she used to hold unwaveringly to her faith in the Good Shepard (Alvarez 53). Patria legitimately stares into the face of death in her stillborn child and into the darkness of her own doubts only to then fight for a life colored by faith and mothering love. When she begins to look beyond her own pain into the lives of the those around her, “it was as if I’d been facing the wrong way all my life. My faith stirred.” (Alvarez 58). After the mountain retreat ambush, “Patria is no longer willing to play her socially prescribed role of the ‘good wife’ at the expense of her conscience” (Gomez Vega). Her hope after such devastation not only distinguishes her further amongst the sisters but also strengthens the ties between her passion and righteousness. In “yearning for redemption, [Patria] views the struggle in terms of a need for trust and national reconciliation,” (Behar) rather than in the frustrations and indignation as

Minerva does. In the face of the increasing turmoil, Patria involves herself in the revolution through becoming the mother of the rebels with a love motivated by her personal faith and loss.

Patria exemplifies how each woman empowers herself and others by each surrender she makes. Thus, feminine strength contrasts with the masculine power of El Jefe, the husbands, or even the Mirabal's own father. Each man originally attempts to actualize his will by forcing himself upon a given situation in both public and private domains. Yet Patria changes her surroundings by giving up her original plans and graciously dealing with loss. In deciding to marry, rather than become a nun, Patria actualizes her desires in a way a man of her time never would; she surrenders her public image to the risk of others' perceptions. When Patria and Pedrito lose their baby, Patria learns that rather than using sex to forcibly navigate them both away from grief, she must "be gentle" (Alvarez 54) to change the world for her husband. Later, when her older son, Nelson, yearns to join the revolution, Patria must first lose her "murdered son of a few hours ago" (Alvarez 162) to take her own place as the mother of the nation itself. Her identity strength grows by "consistently facing... choices that involve sacrifices of home and hearth" (Ink). Patria admits that she "like every woman of her house, [she] disappeared into what [she] loved" (Alvarez 148). Only now, the house she loves fills the island itself and she has grown stronger by the sacrifices she suffered.

Patria represents the depth of a woman in history who serves as a model of not only an effective world changer, but also as a wholistic woman who defies traditional stereotyping. When she rejects a future at the convent, her reflections show a level-headed peace: "I was so sorry to disappoint her, and yet I felt there was nothing to apologize for" (Alvarez 49). Patria's complexity as a humanized character supports the weight of her love and attraction for Pedrito as well as her reverence for the sacred. Accepting the call of her flesh enabled her to reunite her

soul to herself so now “there was more, not less, of me to praise God” (Alvarez 49). Patria subjects her desires to her decisions instead of allowing them to overcome her as an archetypally sensual woman may have. Rather than succumbing to the limitations a refabricated woman, Patria proves that “the history of any nation rightly belongs not to women who forgive and forget but to those who forgive even as they remember” (Behar) because not only does she aid the revolution, she maintains her strength as a mother and wife throughout the revolution. By maintaining her own identity rather than attempting to become someone else, Patria rejects the trap in the “deceptive relationship between visibility and power” (Ramírez); she instead uses her role as the woman of the home as well as her private, passionate love for that home to change a nation. Patria fully represents a womanhood that does not compromise any part of her own identity, but instead uses every aspect of her complex person to her strength.

Alvarez’s women are not limited by the traditional roles they take on, rather they are empowered by them because of the unique women whom they are. Patria embraces her own contrasts to richly depict a woman’s strength in a divided world. Rather than responding to El Jefe’s government with the same confrontational aggression of a man or the dedication of a political activist like her sister Minerva, Alvarez equips Patria to speak out against the regime with her own voice to call for a more loving world.

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