



Postcolonialism and Women's Agency in Isabel Allende's "Toad's Mouth": Colonial Economy, Sexuality and the Politics of Choice

*¹Dr. Gaana MN

*¹Associate Professor, Department of English, Maharani Women's Arts, Commerce and Management College, Seshadri Road, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

Abstract

Isabel Allende's "Toad's Mouth" situates the story of Hermelinda, a sex worker in the remote South American pampas, within a landscape transformed by British commercial expansion. Although critical discussions of the story have examined sexuality, prostitution, gender stereotypes, and female empowerment, the relationship between its colonial economy and Hermelinda's sexual economy merits closer attention. This article argues that Allende establishes a significant connection among colonial possession, capitalist extraction, gendered labour, and the commodification of the female body. Sheep breeders, Ltd. transforms land, indigenous cultural traces, animals, and local labour into resources governed by foreign capital. Hermelinda, in contrast, constructs a counter-economy in which male desire becomes a source of her own economic accumulation. Yet her position remains contradictory: she is simultaneously erotic spectacle and economic agent, commodity and entrepreneur, object of desire and desiring subject. Drawing principally upon Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminist critique, this article conceptualizes Hermelinda's power as situated agency rather than absolute liberation. The ambiguity surrounding Pablo's apparent conquest, Hermelinda's accumulated wealth and mobility, and the company's subsequent importation of a ceramic toad from London reveal the limits of patriarchal possession and colonial substitution. Ultimately, "Toad's Mouth" represents women's agency as the capacity to negotiate unequal colonial, capitalist, and gendered structures from within.

Keywords: Isabel Allende, "Toad's Mouth", postcolonial feminism, women's agency, colonial capitalism, sexuality, commodification.

Introduction

Isabel Allende's "Toad's Mouth" initially appears to invite interpretation primarily as a provocative narrative of sexuality. Its protagonist, Hermelinda, makes a living among isolated male workers by devising erotic games in which access to her body becomes a prize. Yet beginning with Hermelinda alone risks overlooking the political geography through which Allende deliberately introduces her. The story begins not with a woman or a sexual encounter but with land—a remote southern landscape whose environment, indigenous history, and labour relations have been transformed by European commercial occupation.

Allende locates the narrative in an extreme southern landscape of stone, sedge, ice, plains, mountains, and glaciers. The narrator ironically compares its reversed seasonal rhythms with those of supposedly "civilized nations" (Allende 83). The phrase immediately introduces a European standard through which the non-European world is categorized. More significantly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the English find apparently little in the region that can simply be removed for profit and therefore obtain concessions to raise sheep. The animals multiply, consume the vegetation, and trample the remaining altars of indigenous cultures (83). Within a few sentences, Allende connects commercial

expansion with ecological transformation and indigenous cultural erasure.

Only after establishing this colonial landscape does the narrative introduce Hermelinda. The sequence matters. Her sexual economy operates within a world in which ownership, labour, exchange, and profit have already been organized by foreign capital.

Patricia Hart's work on Allende emphasizes the writer's feminist transformations of established narrative and cultural conventions, while David Buehrer offers a more sceptical interpretation of "Toad's Mouth," arguing that Hermelinda's resourcefulness and sexual ingenuity coexist with gender stereotyping and that Pablo's arrival potentially compromises her apparent empowerment.

Rather than asking simply whether Hermelinda is empowered or objectified, this article places her erotic economy in sustained relation to the colonial economy that surrounds it. It argues that "Toad's Mouth" presents two interconnected systems of value. Sheep breeders, Ltd. transforms land, animals, and labour into resources controlled by foreign capital. Hermelinda creates a different economy within this environment, converting male desire into money while retaining significant control over the terms of exchange.

This parallel, however, should not lead to a simple equation

between colonized land and the female body. The difference between them is more important. Hermelinda possesses capacities unavailable to appropriated territory: she can negotiate, manipulate, accumulate, desire, choose, and eventually move. Her power can therefore be understood as situated agency—agency exercised within material and patriarchal constraints rather than freedom from those constraints.

Postcolonial Feminism and Situated Agency

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminist critique provides an appropriate framework for understanding Hermelinda's contradictory position. In "Under Western Eyes," Mohanty challenges feminist discourses that construct women in postcolonial societies as a homogeneous category already defined by oppression. Such approaches risk overlooking the historically specific economic, cultural, and political relationships through which women experience power.

This distinction is particularly useful in reading Hermelinda. To classify her simply as an exploited prostitute would overlook her economic control, pleasure, social authority, and mobility. Conversely, to regard her as completely liberated because she profits from sexuality would ignore the fact that her economic success depends upon male desire and the sexual objectification of her body.

Agency, therefore, need not mean sovereignty.

Hermelinda cannot abolish the colonial economy in which she lives. Nor can she remove herself entirely from patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, she acts meaningfully within these conditions and alters the circulation of money, desire, and social authority.

The more productive question is consequently not whether Hermelinda is entirely free, but what she is able to do within structures she does not control.

Colonial Economy: Land, Labour and Extraction

The opening of "Toad's Mouth" establishes colonialism primarily as an economic system. The English obtain concessions to raise sheep when the landscape initially appears to offer little suitable for direct extraction (Allende 83). The territory must therefore be transformed before it can produce value according to colonial priorities.

The resulting ecological damage is inseparable from cultural destruction. Sheep consume the vegetation while trampling indigenous altars (83). Economic expansion thus simultaneously rewrites the physical and historical landscape. What possesses cultural or sacred value for indigenous communities becomes invisible within the commercial logic of the colonial enterprise.

Sheep breeders, Ltd. embodies this transformation. Even its corporate identity reduces the region to its productive function. The landscape becomes meaningful in terms of the commodity it can generate.

The English headquarters further reveals the cultural dimensions of colonial occupation. The superintendent and his wife reproduce English habits in the South American pampas. An artificial lawn and roses create an incongruous imitation of England, while the superintendent's wife remains psychologically attached to the British imperial centre (83). Rather than adapting themselves to the landscape, the colonizers attempt to remake foreign space in their own image.

The rose boundary separating the English *patrones* from the Spanish-speaking workers is therefore more than decoration.

It materializes colonial hierarchy. On one side stand property, management, domestic comfort, and English cultural authority; on the other are labour, barracks, cold, and deprivation (Allende 83–84).

Allende further emphasizes the dehumanizing effects of this economic system by comparing the neglected workers with the sheep they herd (84). Both workers and animals become productive bodies whose value derives primarily from their contribution to the commercial enterprise.

The men's loneliness is therefore not incidental to colonial economics. Their geographical isolation and deprivation of ordinary social relationships are partly produced by their labour conditions. Hermelinda enters precisely this absence.

She supplies what Sheep breeders, Ltd. does not: intimacy, companionship, care, and pleasure.

Hermelinda's Counter-Economy

Allende constructs a striking contrast between the superintendent's wife and Hermelinda. The Englishwoman remains largely separated from the workers behind the physical and social boundaries of colonial privilege. Hermelinda, by contrast, is thoroughly integrated into their community.

The narrator describes her as reigning among them "like a queen bee" (Allende 84). The metaphor grants her a form of authority despite her lack of institutional status. Sheep breeders, Ltd. controls the formal economy, but Hermelinda becomes the centre of an alternative social economy.

Her contribution extends well beyond sexual services. She repairs clothing, nurses sick workers, and writes letters for men communicating with distant sweethearts (84). Such activities constitute forms of affective labour: Hermelinda attends to emotional and bodily needs largely ignored by the colonial employer.

The contrast is significant. Sheep breeders, Ltd. organizes workers for production; Hermelinda contributes to the maintenance of their social and emotional lives. The company extracts labour, while she produces forms of intimacy and community.

Her sexual economy develops from this social position. On page 85, Allende makes Hermelinda's entrepreneurial ability explicit. She devises games designed to produce reliable profits without cheating the participants. Access to her company becomes the prize, but Hermelinda herself establishes the rules.

This arrangement complicates the conventional distinction between commodity and entrepreneur.

Hermelinda is commodified because men compete for sexual access to her body. Yet she also controls the system through which that access acquires economic value. She determines the games, collects the money, and regulates the possibility of winning.

She is therefore simultaneously commodity and economic agent.

The men possess money and desire, but Hermelinda determines the conditions under which both circulate. Her position does not eliminate patriarchal objectification; instead, she strategically redirects some of its material benefits toward herself.

This is the basis of her situated agency.

The Female Body: Objectification and Control

The title game makes this contradiction particularly visible. Hermelinda positions herself as the target while the workers throw coins toward her exposed body (Allende 85–86). The

scene literalizes sexual objectification: the female body becomes a target of male spectatorship, competition, and monetary exchange.

Yet Allende introduces a crucial detail. Hermelinda can move. When an unusually skilled player threatens to succeed, she can shift her body at the last moment and cause his coin to miss (86).

This apparently minor action transforms the politics of the scene. Hermelinda is not an inert target. The object of the gaze watches those who gaze at her. The body supposedly available for male conquest retains the ability to frustrate that conquest.

The movement offers an especially useful metaphor for situated agency.

Hermelinda does not leave the boundaries of the game; she moves within them.

She does not abolish the structure that objectifies her. Instead, she manipulates its rules and retains an element of control over its outcome.

The distinction also demonstrates why the female body should not simply be treated as an allegory of colonized territory. Both the landscape and Hermelinda's body become sites for producing economic value, but their relationship to extraction differs fundamentally.

The colonized landscape cannot determine how it is used. Hermelinda can influence access to her body.

The land cannot retain the wealth extracted from it. Hermelinda accumulates her earnings.

The land cannot frustrate possession intentionally. Hermelinda can make a coin miss.

Most significantly, the land cannot leave. Hermelinda eventually does.

The parallel between territory and body therefore illuminates agency primarily through difference rather than equivalence.

Sexual Labour and Female Desire

The narrative further complicates a straightforward model of exploitation by establishing that Hermelinda's continued work cannot be explained entirely through economic necessity. By the time Pablo arrives, she has accumulated what the narrator describes as a "small fortune" (Allende 86).

She could potentially withdraw from sexual labour.

Yet a conventional retirement has apparently not attracted her because she enjoys her work and takes satisfaction in the pleasure she provides (86).

This is an important dimension of Allende's representation of female sexuality. Hermelinda is not simply the object of male desire.

She possesses desire herself.

Acknowledging this does not romanticize sex work or erase the unequal gender structure surrounding it. Her income continues to depend upon men who sexualize her body. Nevertheless, reducing her to a passive victim would erase the sexual subjectivity that the narrative explicitly gives her.

Hermelinda therefore occupies several apparently contradictory positions: she is economically dependent upon male customers yet financially independent; she is sexually objectified yet sexually desiring; she performs traditionally feminized care yet exercises unconventional authority.

These contradictions should not be regarded as evidence that the story fails to decide whether she is empowered.

They constitute the form of her agency.

Pablo: Conquest or Choice?

Pablo's arrival poses the greatest challenge to this

interpretation.

An Asturian who has left Spain and lives partly through contraband, Pablo is European but not straightforwardly aligned with the English colonial establishment. He openly dislikes the English and belongs to a mobile and precarious world rather than to the managerial centre of Sheep breeders, Ltd. (Allende 86).

He travels south after hearing stories about Hermelinda. His participation in the game initially appears to restore a conventional masculine narrative of conquest. Pablo studies Hermelinda, controls his own body, succeeds where other men have failed, and wins the game.

Buehrer consequently raises an important objection to celebratory feminist readings of the story: Hermelinda's sexual and economic ingenuity may ultimately be contained by the arrival of a masculine figure who resembles the conquering hero of conventional romance.

The text initially makes such an interpretation plausible. Pablo succeeds, takes Hermelinda's hand, and appears to transform victory in the game into possession of the woman.

Yet Allende immediately introduces narrative uncertainty.

At precisely the point when Pablo's conquest appears complete, the narrator suggests the possibility that Hermelinda may herself have selected him—perhaps "she chose him from among the others" (Allende 87).

This qualification is pivotal.

Allende does not establish that Hermelinda deliberately allowed Pablo to win. Instead, she makes the meaning of the event undecidable. What appears to spectators as masculine conquest may simultaneously constitute female selection.

The ambiguity protects Hermelinda from interpretive possession.

Pablo may believe that he has won her. The spectators may believe the same. Even the conventions of heterosexual romance encourage that conclusion. Yet the narrator leaves open an interior intention unavailable to the male gaze.

Agency here takes the form of narrative opacity: Hermelinda's motivation cannot be completely known or possessed.

Money, Choice and Mobility

Hermelinda's eventual departure with Pablo might similarly appear to reinstate a traditional romantic structure in which an independent woman finally abandons her former life for a man.

Allende, however, includes a material detail that substantially complicates this interpretation.

Hermelinda leaves wearing travelling clothes and carries a canvas bag filled with coins tied to her waist (88).

The coins represent the accumulated product of her sexual economy. More importantly, they establish that Pablo does not economically rescue her. Hermelinda possesses material resources before she leaves with him.

The economy that objectifies Hermelinda has simultaneously provided resources she can carry away.

Her departure does not necessarily constitute complete emancipation. She leaves with a man rather than independently, and Allende deliberately withholds the future of their relationship. But economic dependence cannot adequately explain her choice.

The bag of coins therefore becomes a material sign of situated agency. Hermelinda has converted a structure organized around the consumption of her body into resources contributing to her own capacity for movement.

The Ceramic Toad and Colonial Substitution

The story's conclusion brings the colonial economy and Hermelinda's sexual economy together with remarkable precision.

After Hermelinda leaves, the workers become restless and dissatisfied. Sheep breeders, Ltd. responds through the logic it understands best: acquisition. Management provides amusements and eventually imports from London an enormous ceramic toad with an open mouth (Allende 88).

The colonial establishment attempts to reproduce Hermelinda's game as a commodity.

But the substitution fails.

The workers remain indifferent to the ceramic toad because the company has mistaken the mechanism of Hermelinda's game for its meaning. Her importance never resided merely in providing a target for coins.

The ceramic toad can receive money.

It cannot desire.

It cannot establish rules.

It cannot nurse a sick worker or write a love letter.

It cannot move to frustrate a throw.

It cannot choose a winner.

It cannot accumulate its own earnings.

And it cannot leave.

The imported object therefore becomes everything that patriarchal objectification attempts to make Hermelinda: a passive target into which men throw money.

Only after Hermelinda has departed does the story contain such a completely passive object.

The irony deepens when the workers reject the imported amusement and the ceramic toad eventually reaches the English household, where it becomes a means of relieving the colonizers' own boredom (88). Colonial capitalism succeeds in appropriating the external form of a local practice while failing to reproduce the human relationships that gave it significance.

The episode retrospectively clarifies the distinction between commodification and subjectivity.

Hermelinda can be commodified.

She cannot be reduced completely to a commodity.

Conclusion

Isabel Allende's "Toad's Mouth" places women's agency within an environment already structured by colonial extraction, capitalist labour, and patriarchal desire. The opening description of English sheep farming establishes a political economy in which land is reorganized for foreign profit, indigenous cultural traces are destroyed, and local workers occupy conditions of deprivation and social isolation. Within this environment, Hermelinda creates an alternative economy of care, sexuality, and exchange. She is undeniably objectified, yet objectification does not exhaust her subjectivity. She determines the rules of her games, converts male desire into personal income, accumulates wealth, experiences sexual pleasure, and retains the ability to manipulate access to her body.

Her power is therefore neither absolute liberation nor passive victimhood.

It is situated agency.

The title game provides the story's clearest image of this condition: Hermelinda remains within the chalk boundaries, but she can move. Similarly, she remains within structures of patriarchal desire while manipulating some of their terms.

Pablo's apparent conquest does not finally resolve the

question. Allende deliberately introduces the possibility that Hermelinda may have chosen the supposed winner. Her subsequent departure remains equally ambiguous, but the coins tied to her waist demonstrate that she leaves possessing resources accumulated through her own economic activity.

The ceramic toad imported from London finally reveals the limits of both colonial appropriation and patriarchal objectification. Sheep breeders, Ltd. can reproduce Hermelinda's game as a commodity but cannot reproduce the woman who created it. The object can receive coins but possesses neither desire nor choice.

"Toad's Mouth" consequently refuses two reductive representations of women in postcolonial contexts: the wholly liberated heroine and the powerless victim. Hermelinda inhabits the unstable territory between them. Her agency emerges through negotiation with the colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal structures surrounding her rather than through escape from them.

The English transform land into capital. Hermelinda performs a different transformation: she converts the desire directed toward her body into money, money into material independence, and material independence into the possibility of movement.

The colonial establishment can reproduce the game after she leaves.

What it cannot reproduce is the woman who learned how to play it.

References

1. Allende I. Toad's Mouth. Peden MS, translator. In: Colchie T, editor. *A Hammock Beneath the Mangoes: Stories from Latin America*. Plume; 1992. p. 83–8.
2. Buehrer D. *From Magical Realism to Fairy Tale: Isabel Allende's The Stories of Eva Luna*. 1997.
3. Hart P. *Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP; 1989.
4. Mohanty CT. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke UP; 2003.
5. Mohanty CT. Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. *Feminist Review*. 1988;(30):61–88.
6. Mohanty CT. 'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles. *Signs*. 2003;28(2):499–535.