

Vivan las Mariposas

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Freedom is a privilege that many of us take for granted today. For the most part, this fundamental human right has been borne of struggle, suffering and sacrifice. Such sacrifice is the theme of *'In the time of the butterflies'*; a fact-based fictional account of the life of the Mirabal sisters, penned by author Julia Alvarez, whose own family was forced to flee the Dominican Republic to escape imprisonment. This important work tells the tale of Patria, Maria Teresa, Minerva and Dede, four women who never considered themselves heroes nor dared to imagine that they would become symbols of 'courage, dignity and strength' to the Dominican people, in the face of a cruel, repressive regime.

Author, Julia Alvarez, thoroughly explores how these seemingly ordinary women became freedom fighters and examples of courage and hope to an entire population. The story is told through the eyes of the four sisters and illustrates each one's awakening to the atrocities going on around them. Alvarez skillfully moves between the past and the present as she brings each sister's experience and personality vividly to life. Their experiences, while striking in their difference, bring them all to the same tragic point.

'In the time of the butterflies' is set at the height of the Trujillo regime, when 'civil liberties were nonexistent' and 'brutality and terror' reigned. This was a time when 'Dominicans were required to hang a picture of El Jefe, as Trujillo was called, in their homes and school children were taught to revere him'. El Jefe, Rafael Loenidas Trujillo Molina was born to poor mixed race parents in San Cristóbal. In 1930 he overthrew President Horacio Vásquez, promoted himself to the rank of general and established an oppressive dictatorship in the Dominican Republic for just over three decades. Trujillo and his regime terrorized, imprisoned or persecuted anyone who did not adhere to his unjust rules. He instilled fear in many; just speaking to or being related to any one suspected of plotting against Trujillo and his regime, lead to constant questioning, imprisonment and in some cases disappearances.

'Las Mariposas' (the butterflies), the code name under which three of the sisters, Patria, Minerva and Maria Teresa became known, were born to wealthy parents, Enrique Mirabal and Maria Mercedes Mirabal in Ojo de Agua, a small town close to the city of Salecedo. They lived what was considered a privileged lifestyle at a time when the defined role of women was that of wife and mother, regardless of educational background. The girls all married as was expected of them in that era, however, las Mariposas were drawn to and married men who believed in the struggle for freedom and worked alongside their wives in the fight to liberate their homeland. Dede, the only surviving Mirabal sister accepted a more traditional role and was forbidden to take part in any anti-Trujillo activities by her husband. The guilt of her choices haunted her for many years and she dedicated herself to keeping the memory of her sisters alive.

Minerva was the first of the sisters to experience her political awakening. She became friends with students at her Catholic Boarding School who had suffered the experience of

members of their families being arrested, tortured or murdered, by Trujillo's men. She saw first hand El Jefe's penchant for young girls, many of whom he made his mistresses and kept in houses all over the country. Minerva herself experienced the amorous advances of Trujillo who she publicly rebuked and paid for with her brief imprisonment soon after. Her father was also jailed for two (2) years because of Minerva's audacity to refuse Trujillo's attentions. He never recovered and died shortly afterwards from the beatings and malnutrition. This only served to fuel Minerva's anti-Trujillo's fervor and opened the eyes of Patria and Maria who joined their sibling in her political activities. Together with their husbands, the three women organized underground opposition.

Trujillo did all in his power to dim the spirit of the Mirabals, he seized their property and wealth, leaving them practically bankrupt. He also spied on them and had them regularly brought in for interrogation. He crushed two insurrection attempts in 1949 and 1959 respectively, and had those involved either arrested or killed. The 14th of June Movement, an internal resistance organization, was born of these failed attempts to overthrow the government. Las Mariposas were key figures in the movement and along with other members planned to assassinate Trujillo in 1960. Unfortunately, they were discovered and arrested along with other movement members. Many were executed.

The womens' husbands were also arrested and tortured. External pressure led to the eventual release of the sisters, their husbands however remained imprisoned. Support for Las Mariposas and the Mirabals grew, a fact which became a thorn in the side of the dictator. He relocated Minerva's and Patria's husbands to a remote prison fully knowing that the women religiously visited them. On November 25th 1960, Trujillo's henchmen ambushed the three sisters and their driver on the way home from one of the prison visits and they were beaten to death.

'The deaths of the 'Butterflies' galvanized the political insurrection that led to Trujillo's assassination in 1961. On December 17th 1999, (38 years later) the United Nations General Assembly designated November 25th, the anniversary of their murder as the "International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women", in commemoration of the Mirabal sisters' sacrifice.

"Vivan las Mariposas" is still today a phrase of encouragement for people, a ray of hope, and for some, a symbol of freedom. Many died in the fight for freedom and justice over the thirty-year reign of Trujillo. According to Alvarez, this story was one she felt compelled to tell as a woman of Dominican heritage. In her words, "In our Latin American countries, there is a tradition of *el testimonio*, bearing witness and telling the stories in which we remember what we must not forget: the high cost of freedom, the grassroots power of the people to bring about important change."

Many of us can never fully understand and know what life would be like without the many privileges and freedom that we enjoy today. However, reading books such as this one could bring us one step closer to appreciating all that has been endured and achieved, by those people who chose to fight for the better life that many of us now enjoy. *"Vivan Las Mariposas"*, *Viva the power of the individual in the face of adversity.*

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