

A Critical Analysis of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Context of Latin American History and the Genealogy of Buendia Family

Hardeep Kaur

Research Scholar, Department of English and Cultural Studies,
Panjab University (Chandigarh)

Abstract: *In this paper an attempt has been made to critically analyse one of the popular novel by Gabriel Garcia Marquez by first taking into account the history of Latin America as a nation which is reflected in its miniature version of Macondo in the novel. Furthermore, the study of plot of the text and the facts in history are juxtaposed through the history of Buendia family which forms the timeless zone and faces decadence at the end. The colonial aspect will be discussed in relation to politics and technological advancement leading to the effacement of the town. Additionally, the technique of 'magic realism' and the non-linearity of time will be critically contextualised.*

Keywords: Banana strike, Buendia, European colonialism, gypsies, Magic Realism, Marquez, Latin America

To understand the working ideology behind Marquez's work it is crucial to first study the background of the emergence of such psyche in context of the socio-cultural history of Latin America which was a nation with its indigenous culture and tradition before it faced the bloodshed through European colonialism. The regions under this nation had lived without major upheaval for three centuries under Spanish authoritarian rule. However, in the early 20th century the U.S. began to arbitrate the internal affairs of the Latin American republics – known as yanqui imperialism i.e. America's imperialism in economic, military and cultural terms (Bakewell, 390). This form of subjugation is substantiated through specific episodes in the novel discussed in the later part of this paper.

In 1960's and 70's, there was a literary Latin American boom through which the Spanish American novelists gained international success. The reason behind this attention which they drew prevailed due to the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959 which promised the dawn of new age. The novels written in this period were modernist in nature and they used time as a non-linear entity implying multiple perspectives. Moreover, it used the surrealistic technique called 'magic realism', which interfused the factual with the fantastic to reveal the "mysterious elements hidden in everyday reality" (Johnston). The novel *Hundred Years*, traces the development of Macondo from its utopian stage to complete destruction. In the opening chapter, it is revealed that Macondo was the happiest village where even things lacked names and were only pointed out and no one had died only to be followed by a series of deaths later. However, there is a shift in the events and Macondo goes through military struggle in the form of civil wars and Banana strike massacre,

achieves economic prosperity through United Fruit Company yet declines in spiritual terms and is wiped out in the end. Therefore the American capitalist forces by establishing the company employ economic exploitation and the massacre of banana strike results from the military's act of suppression. The cultural aspect can be exemplified symbolically through the English encyclopaedia, which is given by Patricia Brown that shows how the American plantation owners take over Macondo. And when she begins to learn English the influence on the indigenous culture becomes obvious.

It is to be noted that the advent of the technology is first brought through the gypsies who introduce the magnets, telescope and other inventions of science to Macondo. And when the patriarch, Jose Arcadio Buendia realises the importance of the same he laments "We are going to rot our lives away here without receiving the benefits of science", owing to the geographical position of Macondo (Marquez, 17). Ironically, when Mr. Herbert is first invited for lunch by the Buendia family, he takes pleasure in eating bananas "with the distraction of a wise man than with the delight of a good eater...examined the banana meticulously, dissecting it with a special scalpel, weighing the pieces... calculating its breadth with a gunsmith's calipers", only to bring tremendous changes in Macondo by establishing the banana plantation (Marquez, 240). And Macondo similar to the bananas is weighed out and dissected by the capitalist forces later. Additionally, there comes the railway, the cinema, the automobile and the corporate hegemony in the form of United Fruit Company. Here, one can draw parallel with Ngugi's novel *The Petals of Blood*, where Ilmorog like Macondo is invaded by the neo-capitalists who bring commercialisation in to the town and hence

rob it of its nativity. However it cannot be ascertained that the technology is ugly as it aids in the prosperity although the aim behind the same ought to be of progress and not exploitation.

One of the critics point out that Macondo is wiped out as a result of its isolation and seclusion remaining immune to modernistic ideas. Nevertheless the question is does the development lead to growth? Evidently no, as Macondo and the Buendia clan analogous to the massacre of banana strike would be erased out of history and the memory as predicted in the manuscripts. One can also analyse the relevance of the scavengers or the ants which amass the family house of Buendias. It is only through the strong will of Ursula that the ants inhabiting the house are treated and the house is restored back to its vitality again and again. However, when she dies and another maternal figure of Santa Sofia loses her will to save the house from the weevils and leaves it to destruction. So, the scavengers are symbolic of internal evils that prevail in the lives of characters to be eradicated in order to retain vitality and life.

Edna Aizenberg in her essay on Marquez observes that the history of Latin America can be compared to that of Africa, as “[both desired] to come to terms with a fractured history”, yearning for the nostalgia of pre-colonial times. She further relates that Garcia used “...solitude [as] a form and product of violence...exploration of a broken history and an inchoate identity” (1237-39). This can be analysed through the dictatorial figures of Arcadio and Colonel Aureliano Buendia wherein the former’s obsession with the order and his tyranny effect and dismantle him emotionally. On the other hand, the Colonel chooses to retreat into isolation only to engage in a futile and unending process of making and unmaking the gold fishes. The question being raised is whether this isolation led to positive results? And to exemplify this idea further, the issue of resistance and rebellion are to be first discussed theoretically and later through textual context.

Alan Kennedy distinguishes between resistance and rebellion and avers that *One Hundred* relies on it only to undermine it stating that the former is the substitute for the latter. In other words, resistance acts as a supplement for rebellion which may also be related to Hegel’s ‘master-slave’ dialectic. Likewise, rebellion through opposing ensures the existence of the opposite, and in the process, “the opposer becomes the opposable”. This can be substantiated through the character of Colonel Aureliano Buendia, who leads the revolutionary civil wars against the conservative regime and ironically had “to employ enemy troops to put down his own guerrillas” (Marquez, 320). Also, in the novel, Gerineldo Marquez points out that in the act of resisting the tyrannical forces, Aureliano himself ended up as a dictator. Furthermore, the farce of waging wars can also be mentioned here.

While Aureliano loses the basic humaneness in his heart, he realises that the war proved fatal for him as when the war is waged it is summoned with all enthusiasm but when it ends, nobody even remembers the cause. This is what happens, when the last Aureliano Babilonia asks the town people if anybody remembers the Colonel, he perceives obliviousness on their part.

In context of the ending of the novel Kennedy states that reading is inescapable. As though it can be resisted, it cannot be rebelled against. The reader and the last survivor of Buendia clan finish reading the text and the manuscript at the same time. The ending of the book, also marks the end of Buendia family and Macondo. The well known existential philosopher, Albert Camus states that if resistance mute perhaps continues thereupon the unitary regime will collapse in its own contradictions. However, Marquez portrays realistically that it is the rebels who collapse in their contradictions, while keeping silent apropos the fate of the repressive regime.

Another aspect of rebellion is that of a failure in the form of Colonel Buendia. As when the resistance stops, the banana plaque arrives which leads to massacre. And thereafter he laments his decision of abandoning the revolution. Hence, his resistance comes through making and unmaking of the gold fishes. Suzanne Jill observes that “the ‘vicious circle of Colonel Buendia’s little gold fishes’ that paralyzes time also paralyzes life. Like the artist who must withdraw from life to create, Colonel Buendia perhaps uses his passion for making gold fish as a justification for withdrawing, as well” (Ibid., 494). Ultimately, he dies alone in contrast to the circus scene which he witnesses before dying. Ultimately, the solution is not executed through solitude too and even the last son of Buendia, though born with love could not survive as the fate of the engendered family ends with death.

From the Marxist point of view, the solution which Marquez pointed out latently is in socialism as opposed to capitalism. The last Aureliano bears the name of Babilonia, who belonged to the proletariat class, thereby; the survival may be hinted through the working class revolution. Also, the friend of Aureliano, Gabriel Marquez at the end leaves for Paris, to seek a possible future. Thereby, the only survivors can be those outside the “fantastic world” of Macondo. Evidently, in Jeff Browitt words the “solitary fate” of Buendias is the cause and consequence of the selfishness of an entire class, and hence wiped out by a revolutionary wind. This indicates the usher of a new regime which is a possible reference to the hope for an advanced socialist era inspired by the Cuban revolution.

It is to be noted that the initial resistance comes through Jose Arcadio Buendia, when he rebels against the authority of Don Moscote of painting

the houses blue stating “in this town we do not give orders with pieces of paper” (Marquez, 32). Buendia’s authority in the town is so profound that “foundations were not laid or walls built without his being consulted, and it was decided that he should be the one in charge of the distribution of land” (Ibid.). Even the gypsies were later forbidden to set foot in the town again due to fear of perversion. Nevertheless this resistance could not prevent the stronghold of banana plantation and thus the oncoming of outsiders and the military in Macondo.

Incest is another significant form of rebellion in the novel as it is associated with repression. It rebels against the conservative values and the unquestioned traditional beliefs as observed by Philip Swanson. In the novel, the incestuous relationships lead to isolation. For instance, in case of Ursula and Jose Arcadio Buendia when he loses all sense of reality, he is tied to a chestnut tree and hence cut off from the family unit. While in case of Rebecca and Jose Arcadio when the latter dies, Rebecca shuts herself in her own world and dies in solitude. Yet another example can be drawn of Amaranta Ursula and Aureliano Babilonia, where the former dies during child birth and the latter is condemned to die in solitude as is the fate foretold.

The organised religion in the form of priests and magistrates add on to yet another isolation of Macondo from the natural law. The Church, acts from the external position to instil the law of God, which ironically supported the tyranny of conservatism in the name of preserving “public order and family morality”. On the other hand, Fernanda acts on this encroachment from within the family unit. Her sexual frigidity in terms of her adherence to the spiritual adviser who “had marked in purple ink the dates of venereal abstinence” results in losing her husband to a concubine named Petra Cotes. Furthermore, she “imposes the custom of her ancestors” of eating at the large table and though Jose Arcadio Segundo was the first to rebel, the custom was imposed and defined and catalogued by Fernanda. Colonel realising the change protests by saying “at this rate we’ll end up fighting against the Conservative regime again, but this time to install a king in its place” (Marquez, 330). The repressive character of Fernanda kills the innocent love of her daughter Renata with Mauricio Babilonia, only to develop an internal tumour inside her symbolic of her hollow and meaningless restraint.

Time acts in a circular motion in the novel. The names of Aureliano, Jose Arcadio, Ursula, Remedios and Amaranta are repeated by their namesakes of coming generations only to face solitude further. As the gypsies first brought science into Macondo, after a few generations they again come back bringing the same instruments as if Macondo never aged. The dead in the novel come back to interact with the living out of extreme

solitariness. By the end, Ursula in her decrepit state confusing the young Aureliano Babilonia with her own son Aureliano Buendia and gradually begins to lose her sense of reality. At one time she reminds us “I know all this by heart...as if time had turned around and we were back at the beginning” (Marquez, 370-420). So the people, characters, situations are repeated in a circular motion just like Melquiades’ manuscript which discards the linearity of the situations and foretells the fate of the family.

E.R Monegal in his essay, “One Hundred Years of Solitude- The Last Three Pages” notes that the parchments hold the key to the novel and the fate of the family as when Aureliano Babilonia, reads his fate in them the whole story of the text unwinds, thereby it becomes a meta fiction. He further quotes from Borges’ essay “On the Cult of Books”, that “according to Mallarme’, the world exists to culminate in a book; according to Bloy, we are versicles or words...of a magic book...it is the only thing in the world or rather it is the world” (487). Thereby, the book Aureliano reads is emblematical of the same life in which he lives and the fate of being subjected to solitude acts as an accepted reality for the creatures lost in the world of mirages. While Wendy B. Faris notes that the opening reference to Ice and the final talking mirror of the parchments point towards permanent frozen future of Macondo and its inhabitants. This is where all actions are possible though inevitably they move towards death.

There are two episodes of violence in the novel, of that of the revolutionary wars and the banana strike massacre. They both deal with the issue of memory and its obliteration. A critic situates this in context of the “conservative oligarchies domination in Columbia who rewrote the history to suit their interests”. The task of *One Hundred* stated by Garcia is to counter the history “the false one that historians had created and consecrated in the schoolbooks” (Marquez, chapter 17). Therefore, both the massacres are recovered from oblivion and retold from the point of view of the defeated. Likewise, as the memory of Colonel fades into oblivion, “the deluge of the banana strike ‘decreed’ by Mr Brown effaces any recollection of slaughter just as insomnia plaque wipes out the memory...” (Aizenberg, 1244). The episode of insomnia can also be analysed as the attempt of the colonisers to write the history of the natives from their limited view, thereby, this forgetfulness needed to be rewritten in the form of post-colonial literature, in order to ‘write back’ to the Empire. This aspect can be drawn in parallel with Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, where the District Commissioner, representative of Empire selects the title ‘The pacification of the Primitive Tribes of lower Niger’ which underlines the colonial construction of African past.

The role of the technique 'magic realism' becomes imperative in the context of above mentioned factor. Marquez employed this technique to state the reality of everyday life with a magical twist remarkably as to restate the message in a different way. Slemon notes that "magic realism foregrounds the 'gaps, absences and silences' produced by the colonial encounter and reflected in the texts' disjunctive language of narration" (10-20). In this context, *One Hundred* lies in between the language and the surreal reality.

When Marquez awarded the Nobel Prize in 1982, the committee compared the breadth and stature of Marquez to that of Balzac and Faulkner,

praising his imagination for having fashioned an art that "combines the fantastic and the realistic". And it is through this technique that the history of Latin America fictionalised through the novel pertains to reality and yet tends to deconstruct the notion of reality. Hence, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can also be read as a post-modernist novel. This multi interpretative quality of the novel places it among the greatest literary works in history. Conclusively an attempt has been made to ascertain the political and historical aspects of violence in the novel through the colonial viewpoint and address the question of solitude in context of resistance and rebellion.

References :

- Aizenberg, Edna. "Historical Subversion and Violence of Representation in García Márquez and Ouologuem". *PMLA*, Vol. 107, No. 5 (OCT., 1992), pp. 1235-1252. Print.
- Bakewell, Peter. *A History of Latin America*. USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997. Print.
- Bhalla, Alok, ed. *Garcia Marquez and Latin America*. New Delhi: Sterling P, 1987. Print.
- Browitt, Jeff. "From La hojarasca to Cien años de soledad: Gabriel García Márquez's Labyrinth of Nostalgia". *Flinders University Languages Group Online Review*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, August 2005. Print.
- Faris, Wendy B. "Icy Solitude: Magic and Violence in Macondo and San Lorenzo". *Latin American Literary Review*, Vol. 13, No. 25, (Jan. - Jun., 1985), pp. 44-54. Print.
- Jill, Suzanne. "One Hundred Years of Solitude" and "Pedro Páramo": A Parallel". *Books Abroad*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Summer, 1973), pp. 490-495. Print.
- Johnston, Ian. "On Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude." *Liberal Studies* 402. Vancouver Island University. Canada. 28 Mar. 1995. Lecture.
- Kennedy, Alan. "Marquez: Resistance, Rebellion and Reading." *Garcia Marquez and Latin America*. Ed. Alok Bhalla. New Delhi: Sterling P, 1987. Print.
- Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper, 1972. Print.
- Monegal, E.R. "One Hundred Years of Solitude": The Last Three Pages". *Books Abroad*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Summer, 1973), pp. 485-489. Print.
- Slemon, Stephen. "Magic realism as Post-Colonial Discourse". N.A. Web.
- Swanson, Philip. "Cómo leer a Gabriel García Márquez". Madrid: *Ediciones Júcar*. 1991. Print.