I know where I got the idea to write a book about a dictator. In Caracas, at the start of 1958, when Pérez Jiménez fell.

Pérez Jiménez had already left. The government junta was meeting in a chamber at Miraflores Palace. And in the anteroom there we were, all the journalists in Caracas, at four A.M., waiting the whole night for an announcement about the fate of the country which was being played out in that chamber.

At a certain moment the door opened the first time, and out came an officer in combat fatigues, his boots all muddy, pointing toward the room with a submachine gun. Pointing in, where Larrazábal and others were deciding Venezuela’s lot. And he moved backwards among us journalists, with those boots of his, down the carpeted stairway. He got into a car and left.

I don’t know who that soldier was. I do know he got asylum in Santo Domingo. But at that moment, and I can’t say how, I had an insight about what power is. How that guy who was taking off — via an infinitely delicate contact — lacked power, and how, if that contact hadn’t failed him, the story of that guy and of the whole country would have changed.

And so, what is the spark that generates power? What is power?

It’s so mysterious!” (“And Now” 17)

The above lines are an extract from an interview with Márquez, where he recounts one of his own experiences in Caracas, which eventually formed a basis for his writing a novel about an ageless tyrant. The Autumn of the Patriarch (The
Autumn) then, is not just about a dictator, rather as Márquez calls it he had wanted it to be “a long poem about the solitude of power” (“And Now” 19). The Patriarch’s despotism, cruelty, abusive and repulsive sexuality and an almost anti-human stance arises out of power.

The emergence of caudillos or dictators has its origin in power. Elena De Costa explains this persisting figure of the caudillo in Latin America as well as that of caudillismo itself:

*Caudillismo* refers to the exercise of total and arbitrary power by a strong man. After the conquest of Latin America, this system permitted members of native elites to retain a local power base in exchange for loyalty to the colonial regime. In this way, rural populations were kept in the semi-feudal position of retainees. *Caudillismo* — from the Spanish word *caudillo*, a leader or military chieftain — has taken various forms throughout its long history in Latin America. For the most part, *caudillos* have come from the military sector. They have a firm interest in maintaining their power base, maximizing personal gain and defeating rivals. A charismatic personality is a feature common to many leaders of this kind.

The decades following the Wars of Independence in Latin America are known as the age of the *caudillos*. Military chieftains organized private armies of *gauchos* or *llaneros* and vied for power. The period was chaotic and characterized by intermittent civil wars. A few countries were able to replace this anarchical system with constitutional rule, but in most countries national *caudillos* assumed
power and tended to centralize authority . . . . The power of *caudillismo* has been an effective means for mobilizing mass political movements, centralizing the power of the state, and instituting innovative and revolutionary changes. But since the system *caudillismo* sustains is often too dependent on the power and prestige of one man, political succession, institutional stability, and continuity of policy become major and persistent problems in the society.

Some of the more notorious 19th century *caudillos* include: in Venezuela, José Antonio Paez (1830-36; 1861-63) and Antonio Guzmán Blanco (1870-88); in Argentina, Juan Manuel de Rosas (1829-52); in Mexico, Antonio López de Santa Anna (1829-55). In the 20th century, military men who have established extremely repressive *caudillo*-type personal dictatorships have been: Juan Vicente Gómez in Venezuela; Fulgencio Batista in Cuba; Rafael Leónidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic; Anastasio Somoza and his son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, in Nicaragua; Francois Duvalier and Lieutenant General Rauol Cedras in Haiti; Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (1930-45) and Augusto Pinochet in Chile. Most literary and “liberal” political writers condemn *caudillos* for their despotism, brutality, cupidity and antidemocratic stance. (110-11)

In simple terms, dictatorships in Latin America are “a painful, complex, long-standing historical reality all too familiar to the denizens of most Latin nations” (Bell-Villada, *García Márquez* 168). Dictator novels have been one of Latin America’s specific literary subgenres and the figure of the Patriarch in Márquez’s novel
“identifies the cult of the dictator as a principal source of the misery and destitution endemic in Latin America” (Boyers 73).

*The Autumn* is an intricate mesh of shifting multiple narrators. About the complex style of the novel, Jonathan Yardley writes:

> Whatever the exact inspiration for the style of “The Autumn of the Patriarch,” it is stream of consciousness. Here, though, the device is taken to new dimensions, for this is the consciousness not of a single individual but of an entire nation. With extraordinary suppleness, García Márquez moves in and out of different heads. The principal one is that of the tyrant, found dead at last “at an indefinite age somewhere between 107 and 232 years,” but we hear as well from people who served him, people who feared him, people who were tortured and/or executed at his orders, people who submitted to his clumsy, brutal sexual demands and bore his thousands of nameless children. (“When a Great Novelist”)

It is one of the most complex of Márquez’s novels with six unnumbered chapters, each chapter being a single paragraph with a sinuous syntax. Gene H. Bell-Villada illustrates the structure: “By way of illustration, the first chapter of the novel has thirty-one sentences, the third nineteen, the fifth only fifteen, the sixth and final one being made up of a single 1,825-line sentence (in the Sudamericana edition)” (*García Márquez* 168). Throughout the novel, the dictator is called by different names — the ‘General’, ‘the stud’, ‘the most worthy one’ etc. which satirically reflects on the numerous titles that most dictators usually appropriate for themselves as in the case of Dominican dictator Trujillo who had countless titles like “‘Super-man’, ‘Super-Great

An unnamed dictator of a “blasted nation” (Kennedy 2), the Patriach is a spectacle, the embodiment of egocentric evil unleashed, maniacally violent, cosmically worthless and despite pretensions to eternity, as devoid of meaning as anything else in an absurd world. His main contribution to life, finally, is fear; but fear such as thunder, cancer or madness may provoke, fear based on irrational possibility, on the oblique ravages of a diabolical deity. (Kennedy 3)

He is one whose long rule “is a nightmare that startles us with its terrible loathsomeness” (Rockey 166).

Over the weekend the vultures got into the presidential palace by pecking through the screens on the balcony windows and the flapping of their wings stirred up the stagnant time inside, and at dawn on Monday the city awoke out of its lethargy of centuries with the warm, soft breeze of a great man dead and rotting grandeur. Only then did we dare go in without attacking the crumbling walls of reinforced stone, as the more resolute had wished, and without using ox bows to knock the main door off its hinges, as others had proposed, because all that was needed was for someone to give a push and the great armored doors that had resisted the lombards of William Dampier during the building’s heroic days gave way. It was like entering the atmosphere of another age, because the air was thinner in the rubble pits of the vast
lair of power, and the silence was more ancient, and things were hard to see in the decrepit light . . . in the rear we saw the ancient viceregal stable which had been transformed into a coach house, and among the camellias and butterflies we saw the berlin from stirring days, the wagon from the time of the plague, the coach from the year of the comet, the hearse from progress in order, the sleep-walking limousine of the first century of peace, all in good shape under the dusty cobwebs and all painted with the colors of the flag. (García Márquez, The Autumn 1-2)

A spectacle at once of past grandeur and present decay, the narrators here are some common men of the regime who “dared” to go inside the “vast lair of power” where the “silence was more ancient”, in order to witness the presumably dead dictator. The dictator’s long rule is understood as the people see “the wagon from the time of the plague” as well as “the coach from the year of the comet”. The rottenness, bleakness and the image of everything old and ancient — all symbolize the immeasurably long time of the despot’s rule over the country and the resultant decay and desolation of years of tyranny. The description of the dictator through the narrator’s eyes reinforces the power of the ageless dictator — someone who has ruled for so long that no one remembers him but whose presence is always felt:

. . . and there we saw him, in his denim uniform without insignia, boots, the gold spur on his left heel, older than all old men and all old animals on land or sea, and he was stretched out on the floor, face down, his right arm bent under his head as a pillow, as he had slept night after night every night of his ever so long life of a solitary despot.
Only when we turned him over to look at his face did we realize that it was impossible to recognize him, even though his face had not been pecked away by vultures, because none of us had ever seen him, and even though his profile was on both sides of all coins, on postage stamps, condom labels, on trusses and scapulars, and even though his engraved picture with the flag across his chest and the dragon of the fatherland was displayed at all times in all places, we knew that they were copies of copies of portraits that had already been considered unfaithful during the time of the comet, when our parents knew who he was because they had heard tell from theirs, as they had from theirs before them, and from childhood on we grew accustomed to believe that he was alive in the house of power . . . because no mortal had ever seen him since the days of the black vomit and yet we knew that he was there, we knew it because the world went on, life went on, the mail was delivered, the municipal band played its retreat of silly waltzes on Saturday under the dusty palm trees and the dim street lights of the main square, and other old musicians took the places of the dead musicians in the band. (García Márquez, The Autumn 3-4)

It is a “shitty country” (5) where the tyrant’s eternal despotism is the most dreaded thing and this explains the hesitance of the witnesses to believe in his death “because it was the second time he had been found in that office, alone and dressed and dead seemingly of natural causes during his sleep . . .” (García Márquez, The Autumn 5). The Patriarch indeed had died earlier, but only to fool the nation. It was actually the tyrant’s ‘perfect double’ Patricio Aragonés. As Raymond Williams states:
“Maintenance of power is determined by the general’s ability to manipulate the visible and the invisible” (“The Autumn” 141). Patricio Aragonés is one such grotesque manipulation made by the Patriarch. Patricio had perfect physical resemblance with the tyrant, whom the latter forces to assume his personality completely into his own image and thereby creates for himself a God-like, omniscient presence over the country for “it always seemed that he was in two places at once . . .” (García Márquez, The Autumn 8). At one point of time, Patricio becomes the ‘perfect double’ of the Patriarch — thus turning into a second monster. In this situation

the patriarch’s decision to create another human being like himself represents an extreme case of selfishness and arrogance. He has eliminated an intrinsic feature of another human being: the elusiveness and unpredictability of character. By muffling his voice and taking away his capacity for self-criticism, the patriarch has destroyed Patricio’s ability to grow and develop as a person — he is left merely to echo the tyrant’s impervious will. By annulling Patricio’s free will, the patriarch commits a moral transgression. The double is used here to portray vividly the extreme abuse of power of one person over another.

The double is a parody because he is an impostor (and the name Patricio has nothing to do with “patrician”, as Palencia-Roth notes, p.218). The forced loss of identity becomes ironic because the dictator has thereby duplicated his own physical and moral ugliness; now we have two gruesome figures. (Anadón)
It is not just a reflection of the monstrosity of the General alone but also a deliberation on the monstrosity that absolute power can lead to, as Andrew Heywood suggests that in case of politics power is usually thought of as a relationship: that is, as the ability to influence the behaviour of others in a manner not of their choosing. It is referred to in terms of having ‘power over’ people. More narrowly, power may be associated with the ability to punish or reward, bringing it close to force or manipulation, in contrast to ‘influence’, which also encompasses rational persuasion. (7)

Patricio’s confessions on his death-bed however, exposes not just the General’s deceptions and duplicity but also those of his followers:

. . . it would be better now to take advantage and look truth in the face general, so you can know that no one has ever told you what he really thinks but that everyone tells you what he knows you want to hear while he bows to your face and thumbs his nose at you from behind . . .

(García Márquez, The Autumn 21).

The General’s atrocities are passionately depicted by Patricio for which he believes that once the General loses political control, he would be quartered the same way he killed his enemies:

. . . you know that the moment they see you on the street dressed as a mortal they’re going to fall on you like a pack of dogs to collect from you in one case for the killings at Santa María del Altar, in another for the prisoners thrown into the moat of the harbor fort to be eaten by
crocodiles, in another for the people you skin alive and send their hides to their families as a lesson. . . . (22)

In order to test the loyalty of people around him, the General stages his own death by presenting Patricio’s dead body and he witnesses the anger and hatred that people have for him. The reaction of the public shows the intense hatred towards the despot as “the bells of the cathedral stopped tolling their knell and those of all the churches announced a Wednesday of jubilation, Easter rockets exploded . . .” (24) and the mob begins to destroy the palace “so that in the memory of future generations not the slightest memory of the cursed line of men of arms would remain” (25); and the Patriarch saw his own body dragged by . . . feeling in his own flesh the ignominy of the spitting and the sickbed pans that were thrown on him from the balconies as he went by, horrified with the idea of being quartered and devoured by dogs and vultures amidst the delirious howls and the roar of fireworks celebrating the carnival of my death. (García Márquez, The Autumn 25-26)

Márquez exposes the corruptive forces of power when the General sees his fellow politicians already discussing the idea of forming a new government.

Time and again, the narrative would describe terrifying punishments of the Patriarch, thus rendering him no less than a monster. While his opponents begin discussing the takeover of the government, the Patriarch initiates a bloodbath by ordering them to be killed:
. . . the machine guns’ death jubilation started up by the front of the building, the butcher feast of the presidential guard who with great pleasure and great honor general sir carried out his fierce orders that no one should escape alive from the meeting where treason was being hatched, any who tried to escape through the main door were mowed down with machine-gun bursts, the ones who were hanging out the windows were shot down like birds from a blind, the ones who were able to escape the encirclement and took refuge in nearby houses were degutted with phosphorus grenades, and they finished off the wounded in accordance with the presidential criterion that any survivor is a dangerous enemy as long as he lives. . . . (García Márquez, The Autumn 27)

The duplicitous nature of the workings of the Patriarch is exposed when it is said that “he did not have to prolong with any secret maneuvers as he had done at other times, because affairs of the state took care of themselves without any help” (29); while the horrible truth is that the process of torturing his opponents and eliminating any potential danger keeps on going on his orders and Márquez draws a horrific portrait of the manner of torture by the Patriarch himself as he took charge of the interrogation of the prisoners physically present and doing the talking himself to get them to tell him willingly the illusory truth that his heart needed, but he could not manage it, he had them hung from a horizontal beam like parrots tied hand and foot with their heads down for hours on end, but he could not manage it, he had one thrown into the moat of the courtyard and the others saw him
quartered and devoured by the crocodiles. . . (García Márquez, *The Autumn* 30)

This is what happened when Patricio’s body was taken to be the Generals’ followed by the reign of terror. No wonder that the people in the opening section are still in doubt as to whether that really was the actual body of the Patriarch, especially because they have always known “that no evidence of his death was final, because there was always another truth behind the truth” (37), and as the narrator says, “the more certain the rumors of his death seemed, he would appear even more alive and authoritarian at the least expected moment to impose other unforeseen directions to our destiny” (García Márquez, *The Autumn* 38).

The feeling of uncertainty is also a feature of a dictatorship regime. Tangled within rumours and uncertainties, the people are unable to believe in anything, and to hide his true intentions

becomes a fundamental principle, guided by the notion that people will be most afraid when they understand the least. He believes that people need to be kept uninformed or misinformed. He trusts nobody because he does not trust himself, in the sense that he knows that at any moment he can do anything to anybody unexpectedly. (Anadón)

Most often in dictatorships, elimination of political opponents becomes necessary to stay in power, as John Edwin Fagg says, “impossible ‘accidents’ and ‘suicides’ removed inconvenient persons” (qtd. in Boldy 86). The way in which the Patriarch’s political rivals as well as partners mysteriously meet with inexplicable
deaths validates Fagg’s statement because “all he did was keep an eye on his former comrades in arms so that they would not hatch plots but without getting enmeshed in their lives, convinced that they themselves would exterminate each other among themselves . . .” (García Márquez, The Autumn 47). Márquez then swiftly describes the odd manner of deaths of most of the people, emphasizing on the General’s feigned ignorance as well as indifference to these incidents and then ironically, the General “said poor man as if he had nothing to do with those infamous deaths and he issued the same decree of posthumous honors for all, proclaiming them martyrs who had fallen in acts of service . . .” (48). Turning them into political martyrs, the Patriarch gets rid of his opponents. Such episodes may seem outlandish, but they serve to show the brutal realities of repressive regimes and Márquez’s protest through his narrative continues when the Patriarch’s mother Bendición Alvarado is seized by a dizzy spell of horror as she discovered that the walls oozed blood no matter how hard she scrubbed them with lye and ash, lord, that the rugs kept on giving off blood no matter how much she wrung them out, and all the more blood poured in torrents through corridors and offices the more they worked desperately to wash it out in order to hide the extent of the massacre . . . (García Márquez, The Autumn 49-50)

Such use of exaggerated imagery of blood oozing out of the walls, rugs and corridors of the presidential palace serves to symbolize the large amount of blood that had been shed only for the consolidation of political power.
Márquez relentlessly satirizes and undermines the supposed grandeur, courage, dignity and power of the Patriarch by presenting alternate pictures of the same man simultaneously. Invested with God-like powers who can cure sicknesses and alter natural phenomena (like eclipses, earthquakes etc.), he has been the supreme controlling figure of the country — a figure who is “present at every moment and everywhere” and who claims to be the “corrector of earthquakes, eclipses, leap years and other errors of God . . .” (García Márquez, The Autumn 7). Yet, it is this same powerful, dignified man who also supervises the milking of cows in the presidential palace: “Everyday, ever since he had taken possession of the house, he had supervised the milking in the cow barns to measure with his own hand the quantity of milk that the three presidential wagons would carry to the barracks in the city . . .” (6). This juxtaposition of paradoxical pictures of the same man creates “a humorous contrast with the grandiose figure seen by the citizenry, and even with the interior view of himself as a God figure” (Williams, “The Autumn” 138).

In continuance of his God-like image, he manipulates his history of origin, as “he was a man without a father like the most illustrious despots of history” (40) and that his mother Bendición Alvarado had been “attributed the miracle of having conceived him without recourse to any male and of having received in a dream the hermetical keys to his messianic destiny . . .” (García Márquez, The Autumn 40). However, this man who is born with a “messianic destiny” is scandalously exposed by his own mother when she saw her son in dress uniform with his gold medals and velvet gloves which he continued to wear for the rest of his life and she could not repress her impulse of maternal pride and exclaimed aloud in front of
the whole diplomatic corps that if I’d known my son was going to be
president of the republic I’d have sent him to school . . . (41)

The Patriarch’s uncertain origins and illiteracy also has historical semblance
with Venezuelan dictator Juan Vicente Gómez whose
date of birth is unrecorded, though as president he fixed on 24 July so
as to coincide with Bolívar’s birthday. Juan Vicente was the eldest of
thirteen illegitimate children sired by one Pedro Gómez from various
women; the purported father died when Juan was fourteen years old.
Growing up illiterate in the Andes, the dictator-to-be never set eyes on
a city of population larger than six thousand before he reached the age
of forty-two. (Bell-Villada, García Márquez 188)

Despite being a powerful, courageous and extremely feared figure, Márquez
keeps on subverting the image of the Patriarch. Throughout the entire novel which
encompasses the eternally long and tedious rule of the despot, he is shown to be
shutting down “the three crossbars, the three locks, the three bolts on the door of the
presidential bedroom . . . ” (García Márquez, The Autumn 8) every night; which in
turn, humorously exposes his paranoia. His fear of losing power as well as his life
dominates his thoughts:

. . . he would return to the presidential palace with the first lights of
evening, go in through the service entrance hearing the clicking of
sentries’ heels as he went along the corridors and they saluted him all’s
well general sir, everything in order, but he knew that it wasn’t true,
that they were dissembling from habit, that they lied to him out of fear,
that nothing was true in that crisis of uncertainty . . . (García Márquez, *The Autumn* 18)

The irony of having immense power and yet living constantly in fear of being deprived of it is echoed throughout the novel.

Despite being presented as a ‘messianic’ figure, Márquez shows that he is no more than any other mortal. Márquez makes the larger-than-life figure of the Patriarch appear vulnerable as he suffers from old age infirmities. In fact, the absurd and exaggerated details of the decay of both the presidential palace as well as that of the man reinforce the vulnerability and the powerlessness of the Patriarch:

Ambassador Palmerston, one of the last diplomats to present his [the Patriarch’s] credentials, told in his banned memoirs that it was impossible to conceive of old age as advanced as his . . . and I realized at once that he was as deaf as a post not only because I would ask him about one thing and he would answer about another but also because it grieved him that the birds were not singing when in fact it was difficult to breathe with that uproar of birds which was like walking through the jungle at dawn . . . (García Márquez, *The Autumn* 72-73)

Ironically, the Ambassador’s “banned memoirs” reflect the truth, as he writes: “It was hard to admit that that broken-down old man was the same messianic figure . . .” (García Márquez, *The Autumn* 73); and in truth, “the many references to the Patriarch’s invincibility and occult power are surely matched in emphasis and number by references to his pitiful infirmity” (Boyers 74).
Latin American nations have been subject to untold sufferings unleashed by such dictatorial regimes. This exaggerated and extremely dreadful world of the Patriarch where he does everything unimaginable to stay in power and treats the citizens as mere puppets of his whims, serve to represent the grotesque realities of the actual world of most Latin American nations where the powerful dictators, tyrants and despots “keep Latin American populations as far from meaningful control of their destinies as they ever were” (Boyers 76).

Robert Boyers states: “No reader of the novel can fail to see that the patriarch is a hopeless figure who can do nothing of value for his country. Nor is it possible to overlook the wanton cruelty and destruction for which he is responsible” (76). This abominable tyrant who is supposed to have ruled for centuries and at one point is said to be “at an indefinite age somewhere between 107 and 232 years” (García Márquez, The Autumn 71). This unbelievable extent of his rule, however, is not due to some supernatural power but rather the truth is that

the accession to power in Latin America of one despot after another makes it seem that a single figure holds sway longer than anyone can remember. Between one absolute despot and another there is usually little difference to tell, and persons accustomed to hearing of political activities only through rumor and popular legend may not be expected to perceive subtle changes even when changes have in fact taken place. If García Márquez’s patriarch is said to be “at an indefinite age somewhere between 107 and 232 years”, the uncertainty owes more to the way in which power is exercised and handed down in Latin America than to elementary arithmetic confusion. (Boyers 73-4)
In the final pages of the novel, when the death of the Patriarch is confirmed, the citizens “took to the streets singing hymns of joy at the jubilant news of his death and alien forevermore to the music of liberation and the rockets of jubilation and the bells of glory that announced to the world the good news that the uncountable time of eternity had come to an end” (García Márquez, The Autumn 229). His death ushers in hope but even then readers are left with the realization of the sense of “utter waste of power that has no object but its own perpetuation” (Boyers 80).

While the Patriarch is a composite figure of several actual dictators of Latin America, The General in His Labyrinth (The General) is based on the most important historical figure of Latin America — Simón Bolívar.

Simón Bolívar is “Latin America’s most famous and most glamorous historical figure of all time” (Martin, “The General” 102) — someone who is known and revered throughout much of Latin America, but especially in García Márquez’s native land and its neighbours, the figure of Bolívar enjoys cult-like status. Children in school are taught to revere him quasi-religiously, while in adult public life the man inspires high-flown political rhetoric beyond measure. Parks and plazas, boulevards and buildings, schools and universities bear either his name or the honorific title El Libertador (as did a broad avenue near my home in 1950s Caracas). Postage stamps by the hundreds have commemorated him and his accomplishments. There is an entire country named after him; and the bolívar is the currency unit of the
nation of Venezuela, where, in the early twenty-first century, President Hugo Chávez launched a project dubbed the Revolución Bolivariana.

In the academic and information sectors, generations of scholars and scribblers have produced books and articles about him. Over a hundred biographies exist, as well as specialized volumes commenting on every conceivable aspect of Bolívar’s thought, career, and even love life. Educators seek ways to present him to malleable young minds, and in such contexts the laudatory language can reach breathless heights. (Bell-Villada, García Márquez 220-1)

His claim to such fame and reverence rests on his being the supreme leader and commander who liberated (the present nations of) Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Panama, Ecuador and Bolivia from Spanish imperial rule.

In John Lynch’s words:

The history of Bolívar is not a seamless web from first protest to last battle. His life unfolded in three stages: revolution, independence and state building. In the first, from 1810 to 1818, the young, enlightened Venezuelan was a revolutionary leader, who fought and legislated for his native land and its neighbour New Granada. In the second, from 1819 to 1826, he was the universal liberator who saw beyond national boundaries and took the revolution to its limit. In the third, from 1827 to 1830, he was the statesman who sought institutions, security and reform for Americans, and left a legacy of national liberation,
imperfect in his own mind but recognized as a great achievement by
the rest of the world. (*Simón Bolívar* 280)

Countless number of biographies exist as well as other documents based on a
number of aspects of his life — such as his career, family, achievements, his political
manifestoes and even his love life. *The General in His Labyrinth*, however,
concentrates on the last days of Bolívar’s life which was surprisingly the least
documented part of his entire eventful life; and as Bell-Villada states: “Such a gap in
knowledge is precisely what García Márquez takes advantage of to dream up the
journey’s surrounding affective, human, and narrative details, without any danger of
being upstaged or challenged by the harder, solid facts of history” (*García Márquez*
232).

Márquez’s decision to write the final journey of Bolívar from Bogotá to the
Atlantic Coast through the Magdalena River relates to this fact that it was the least
documented part of Bolívar’s life which facilitated his use of imagination, which he
explains in his own words:

The journey was the least documented part of the life of Bolívar. He, who used to write so many letters, wrote only two or three on that trip. Nobody took notes, nobody kept records. That, then, was what allowed me to write without any major limitations to my imagination. ("*The General in His Labyrinth* Is a “Vengeful” Book” 171)
The General, although a work of fiction, is very much based on factual history. Although the fact that the last part of his life being least well documented gave him the license to invent a significant number of episodes — though always, he insists, within the limitations of historical verisimilitude as decreed by the huge quantities of historical information bequeathed by historians, biographers, archivists and, not least, the thousands of letters which Bolívar himself left to posterity. (Martin, “The General” 108)

Márquez’s depiction of Bolívar as not just a national hero but also as a mortal, ailing man is almost iconoclastic, considering the fact that in Latin America “. . . Bolívar has since been mythologized almost to the point of deification . . .” (Martin, “The General” 107). As the novel follows Bolívar’s journey from Bogotá to the coast through the Magdalena River, the memories of his eventful life are “artfully inserted” to “counterpoint his brilliant rise to glory with the stunning decline and fall of his last months” (108).

It was the end. General Simón José Antonio de la Santísima Trinidad Bolívar y Palacios was leaving forever. He had wrested from Spanish domination an empire five times more vast than all of Europe, he had led twenty years of wars to keep it free and united, and he had governed it with a firm hand until the week before, but when it was time to leave he did not even take away with him the consolation that anyone believed in his departure. The only man with enough lucidity to know he really was going, and where he was going to, was the English
diplomat, who wrote in an official report to his government: “The time he has left will hardly be enough for him to reach his grave”. (García Márquez, The General 37)

Bolívar’s political decline, powerlessness and imminent death is poignantly juxtaposed with his earlier glory and power.

The novel begins with the image of the General bathing in a tub as his servant José Palacios finds him “floating naked” (García Márquez, The General 3). This very first ‘naked’ image of the General is the first step in demythologizing the historic figure of Bolívar. His physical decline is mentioned in the very first page which also corresponds to his political failure, as is evident: “That dawn he officiated at the daily mass of his ablutions with more frenetic severity than usual, trying to purge his body and spirit of twenty years of fruitless wars and the disillusionments of power” (5).

The narrative moves to and fro from the present to the past as Márquez recreates the General’s life. He introduces characters who held important positions in Bolívar’s life and narrates most of the events either as an omniscient historian or through the reflections of these characters.

Among the supposedly many lovers of Bolívar, Manuela Sáenz was one of the most enduring and she becomes an important figure in this novel. In John Lynch’s words:
Manuela, unlike his other lovers, was associated with his work and interested in his policies and, without accompanying him on the battlefield as legend has it, seems to have received more confidences from him than his passing fancies. No doubt she was an exhibitionist, determined to cut a public figure and challenge male culture. Always accompanied by two black servant girls, Jonatás and Nathán, she had her own entourage and caused a stir wherever she went. She provoked different reactions in Bolívar’s staff: Sucre was a friend, O’ Leary accepted her at headquarters as a part-time secretary and archivist, but there were some who hated her. She could be awkward and she guarded Bolívar’s archive even against his own minister of war. The legends grew, as well as the scandal. (Simón Bolívar 180)

In the novel, she is not only entrusted with maintaining his personal archives after he leaves but she also becomes his rescuer from an assassination attempt. There was an assassination attempt on September 25, 1828 when Bolívar was helped by Manuela and the incident is relived in the novel. The assassination attempt was a result of intense political rivalry between Bolívar and Francisco de Paula Santander:

This is what happened. On September 25, 1828, at the stroke of midnight, twelve civilians and twenty-six soldiers forced the great door of the Government House in Santa Fe de Bogotá, cut the throats of two of the President’s blood hounds, wounded several sentries, slashed the arm of Captain Andrés Ibarra with a saber, shot to death the Scotsman Colonel William Fergusson, a member of the British Legion and an aide-de-campus to the President, who had called him as valiant as
Caesar, and reached the presidential bedroom, shouting “Long live liberty!” and “Death to the tyrant!”

The rebels would justify the attempt by referring to the extraordinary powers of obvious dictatorial intent that the General had assumed three months before in order to thwart the Santanderist victory at the Ocaña Convention. The vice-presidency of the Republic, which Santander had occupied for seven years, was abolished. Santander told a friend about it in a sentence typical of his personal style: “I have had the pleasure of being buried under the ruins of the Constitution of 1821.” He was then thirty-six years old. He had been named Plenipotentiary Minister to Washington but had postponed his departure several times, perhaps in anticipation of the conspiracy’s success. (García Márquez, The General 53)

Although Santander was once Bolívar’s friend as well as a political ally, growing ideological differences (and also matters of sharing power) created a rift between them which worsened to the limit of planning an assassination attempt on Bolívar. Santander was against Bolívar’s idea of creating a single nation:

Nor was it true that the origin of their antagonism lay in the privileges granted to General Páez, or the ill-fated Constitution of Bolivia, or the imperial investiture the General accepted in Perú, or the lifelong presidency and Senate membership he dreamed of in Colombia, or the absolute powers he assumed after the Ocaña Convention. No: these reasons and many others like them had not caused the terrible animosity that grew more bitter with the years until it culminated in the
assassination attempt of September 25. “The real reason was that Santander could never assimilate the idea that this continent should be a single nation,” said the General. “The unity of America was too much for him”. (García Márquez, The General 117)

In fact, the clash of ideologies between Santander and Bolívar would finally lead to the formation of the two rival political parties in Colombia (the Conservatives and the Liberals) and their rivalry would scourge the nation for endless years. Bolívar had dreamt of unifying the separate nations of Latin America in order to create a single, strong nation but which could never be realized.

Throughout the narrative, Márquez shows the contradictions and complexity in Bolívar’s nature. Although he had declared that he was leaving Colombia, there were very few people who actually believed him. The rumours of his illness and subsequent abdication of powers had been circulating for years but Bolívar’s march towards glory and power continued:

For while they thought he was dying in Pativilca he crossed the Andean peaks again, conquered at Junín, completed the liberation of all of Spanish America with the final victory at Ayacucho, created the Republic of Bolivia, and was happier in Lima and more intoxicated with glory than he had ever been before or would ever be again. As a consequence, the repeated announcements that he at last was leaving power and country because of illness, and the formal public ceremonies that seemed to confirm them, were no more than idle
repetitions of a drama too often seen to be believed. (García Márquez, *The General* 17)

Such uncertainties remained till the end. Entangled in the maze of power, even the General’s final renunciation of presidency in 1830 did not convince people and many still hoped that he would fight back:

. . . the affairs above all, his most loyal friends, urged him to remain in the presidency even if it was by military coup. He discouraged them with the argument that power by force was unworthy of his glory, but he did not seem to reject altogether the hope of being confirmed by a legitimate decision of Congress. (23)

For a man who had enjoyed as well as dictated immense powers and privileges, forsaking them would not be easy and John Lynch provides some idea about Bolívar’s situation when he finally stepped down in 1830:

Bolívar had reached the end of his constitutional projects. He could not totally let go, and in the following weeks he was besieged from one side and another, his mind a turmoil of conflicting ideas, clutching at the slimmest of hopes that something might be rescued from the constitutional ruins of Colombia. But there was nothing left, and no one to equal him. As Bolívar lost his strength of body and powers of leadership, he still remained the one outstanding figure in a gallery of mediocrities. He was now concerned above all to defend his record and refute his enemies. A kingdom was never his intention. Power was
gone. Glory alone remained, and this he was determined to protect.

(*Simón Bolívar* 271)

Bolívar was not just a soldier and liberator but also the dictator and ruler of the newly emancipated nations but by the end of his career (as well as the end of his life), his power and glory suffered a pathetic decline and Márquez deftly concentrates on his diminished glory and powerlessness:

He [Bolívar] followed an unfamiliar path that ended in a poor suburb of muddy narrow streets and red-roofed adobe houses from whose patios rose smell of milking. He hears the sudden shout:

“Skinny Shanks!”

He did not have time to dodge the cow manure that was hurled at him from a stable, smashed into the middle of his chest, and spattered his face. But it was the words more than the explosion of dung that woke him from the stupor in which he had lived since leaving the presidential residence. He knew the nickname the New Granadans had given him: it was the name of a madman famous for his theatrical uniforms. (García Márquez, *The General* 27)

Márquez brings Bolívar down from the pedestal to a position where even the poor (as also powerless) could smack his face with cow manure. His helplessness was further heightened by his financial condition and John Lynch gives an idea of those days:

Bolívar now wanted to leave Colombia. The immediate problem was money. Could he afford it? He was not a wealthy man. His landed
wealth had been eroded by wartime sequestrations. His major asset, the Aroa copper mines, had become a major headache, ‘a mortal agony’ in his final years. In 1824 with the help of Sister María Antonia he had rented them to an English company, which yielded some returns, but not enough. Since 1826 his agents in London had been trying to sell them, but they had still not succeeded by 1830. Congress confirmed the 30,000 pesos yearly for life which he had been granted in 1823, but payment was never absolutely secure and he had always used what he did receive to fund Bolivarian social security. He had already begun to sell his few possessions and prepare for his journey: his silver table service raised 2,500 pesos; jewels, horses and other possessions brought in 17,000 pesos. He began his journey with only a few thousand pesos in ready cash, and anxious about the mines. (Simón Bolívar 273)

This condition is artfully narrated by Márquez:

Before leaving Santa Fe de Bogotá he liquidated the little of value he still owned in order to increase his treasury. In addition to the horses, he sold a silver service dating back to the lavish days of Potosí, which was appraised at two thousand five hundred pesos by the Mint for the simple value of the metal, without taking into account the beauty of its workmanship or its historic importance. When the final reckoning was made, he had seventeen thousand six hundred pesos and sixty centavos in cash, a draft for eight thousand pesos drawn on the public treasury of Cartagena, a pension for life granted him by the Congress and a
little over six hundred ounces of gold distributed among various trunks. (García Márquez, *The General* 30)

Bolívar’s condition reflects “the woeful remnant of a personal fortune that on the day of his birth had been considered among the greatest in the Americas” (30).

His past glory is frequently juxtaposed with his present decadence:

His seven pack mules, however, were carrying chests full of medals and gold tableware and numerous objects of a certain value, ten trunks of private papers, two of books he had read and at least five of clothing, and several chests with all manner of good and bad things that no one had the patience to tally. All of this, however, was not even a shadow of the baggage he had brought with him on his return from Lima three years earlier, when he was invested with triple power as President of Bolívia and Colombia and Dictator of Perú: a drove of pack animals carrying seventy-two trunks and over four hundred chests with countless objects whose value had not been established. On that occasion he had left in Quito more than six hundred books, which he never attempted to recover. (García Márquez, *The General* 31)

The public’s treatment of Bolívar not only reflects his diminished aura but also makes one question the very nature of power. Is the respect, love and honour that are conferred upon a powerful person a mere farce? As the general left Santa Fe de Bogotá, he could see “the insults painted on convent walls” (39). Ironically, it was the same city when
three years earlier, when he had returned from the arid southern wars weighted down by more glory than any American, living or dead, had ever won before, he had been greeted by a history-making spontaneous reception. Those were still the days when people would grasp his horse by the halter and stop him in the street to complain about public services or taxes, or to ask him for favors, or simply to feel themselves close to the radiance of greatness. (García Márquez, The General 40)

Bolívar’s illness and the gradual deterioration of his physical state further made it impossible for him to think of recovering his lost prestige and power. Yet it was his legendary spirit and will power that carried him through. There were people who still had faith in him and he himself inspired hope with his indomitable spirit and indefatigable will power. As Márquez shows, although Bolívar abdicated his powers and began his final journey to leave the continent, he could not essentially de-link himself from the political activities. For a man who had enjoyed absolute power for decades, he could not entangle himself from the labyrinth of power / power control.

Throughout the narrative, one gets to see the dual nature of power. If there were people who loved him to the extent of deification, there were also people who made every attempt to de-glorify him: “For while some people clamored for him, every morning the walls in half the country were painted with insulting slogans. His family, said the broadsides, should be exterminated to the fifth generation” (García Márquez, The General 193). These lines justify John Lynch’s statement that Bolívar “inspired extremes of devotion and detestation” (“Simón Bolívar”).

Despite his deteriorating health, Bolívar retained some hope of coming back to power or at the most fight for the unity of the nation — an idea which was opposed by Santander and his followers; the main reason for opposing being that for the “oligarchies in each country, represented in New Granada by the Santanderists and by Santander himself”, this idea was “unfavorable to the local privileges of the great families” (García Márquez, *The General* 202). Hence, while he was in Cartagena he made the final attempt to resist the present government’s separatist ideologies and wage a final war: “At dawn the house at the foot of La Popa was a dismantled barracks, but the General was sustained by the hope that a new war would make the laurels of long ago green again” (197). General Rafael Urdaneta assumed power on the 5th of September, 1830 in Bogotá through a coup and waited for Bolívar to return and assume the presidency. Bolívar justified the coup stating its need “because of the anarchy and lawlessness that prevailed in the Republic following the dissolution of the previous government” (203). But he declined the offer of presidency and instead offered “his willingness to return to Santa Fe de Bogotá to serve the new government as a simple soldier” (203). The reason for declining presidency however, was more complex than what it seemed. Márquez gives the main reason for Bolívar’s hesitancy: Since Don Joaquín Mosquera had not renounced his title, he could claim recognition as the legal President tomorrow, making the General a usurper. And so he reiterated what he had said in the official letter: As long as there was no clear mandate from a legitimate source, there was no possibility of his assuming power. (García Márquez, *The General* 204)
This last war however, could not be won. Bolívar’s supporting military officials failed to win most of the battles as were planned. And his health also deteriorated to the point of rendering him invalid. He was brought to Santa Marta where he finally succumbed to his illness in the San Pedro Alejandrino plantation on the 17th of December 1830.

Colombians! You have been witness to my efforts to establish freedom where tyranny previously reigned. I have worked without thought of personal gain, sacrificing my fortune and even my peace of mind. I relinquished my power when I became convinced that you mistrusted my detachment. My enemies took advantage of your credulity and undermined what is most sacred to me: my reputation and my love of freedom. I have been the victim of my persecutors, who have driven me to the very threshold of my grave. I forgive them.

As I disappear from among you, my affection tells me that I must make clear my final wishes. I aspire to no other glory than the consolidation of Colombia. You must all work for the inestimable good of the Union: the people offering their obedience to the current government in order to save themselves from anarchy; the ministers of the sanctuary directing their prayers to heaven; and the military officers using their swords to defend social guarantees.

Colombians! My final wishes are for the happiness of the country. If my death contributes to the cessation of factions and the consolidation of the Union, I will step peacefully into the grave. (qtd. in Bushnell 150)
This letter dated 10th of December 1830 was the last one which Simón Bolívar addressed to his countrymen before he died.

The General died — defeated and powerless. The liberator, who was the hero of the revolution and at one point the most powerful man in the Americas, died despised and neglected. Bolívar had said once: “‘The day I die the bells in Caracas will ring in jubilation.’” (García Márquez, The General 194). Ironically, there were not just jubilations but also virile proclamations like the one made by the Governor of Maracaibo: “‘I hasten to share the news of this great event, which, beyond all doubt, will produce untold benefits for the cause of liberty and the well-being of the country. The genius of evil, the firebrand of anarchy, the oppressor of the nation, has ceased to exist.’” (194).

As John Lynch says: “He was a revolutionary who freed six countries, an intellectual who argued the problems of national liberation, a general who fought a war of unremitting violence” (“Simón Bolívar”); and yet at the time of his death he was branded the “genius of evil”, “the firebrand of anarchy” and “the oppressor of the nation”. Till the end, he could not get out of the labyrinth of power and politics.

The obituary in The Times of London wrote of Bolívar:

It would probably have been impossible for the most skilful political architect to have constructed a permanent edifice of social order and freedom with such materials as were placed in the hands of Bolívar; but whatever could be done he accomplished, and whatever good exists in the present arrangements of Colombia and Peru may be traced
to his superior knowledge and capacity. (qtd. in Lynch, *Simón Bolívar* 279)

Bolívar, now, is a cult figure. As John Lynch says:

The apotheosis has gone far beyond the real Liberator, creating an ideal and a myth, a fiction to serve its authors. Bolívar himself did not establish the cult. Guardian of his own glory, he would have been scornful of any attempt by his fellow Americans to glorify him. Yet his life, his achievements, his great battles became embedded in their culture almost as soon as they happened. The memory of them had many layers. It was kept alive first in pure admiration. Then out of respect. And finally as propaganda, serving a number of needs. (*Simón Bolívar* 302)

Yet, this was the man who died poor, powerless and degrified.

Countless number of books has been written on Bolívar till date. His achievements, feats, defeats, national policies have been documented and redocumented. *The General in His Labyrinth*, hence, is one of those few books which concentrate on the least known part of this hero’s life. Intermingling fact and fiction, Márquez recreates the figure of the General in his most vulnerable state — the last days of his life when he was stripped off of all powers and whose condition was worsened by his failing health. It is an unflattering portrayal of a national hero — shown both in the times of prosperity as well as adversity. Bolívar’s heroic feats against the Spanish Army, his long rules over a huge geographical space, his
visionary policies have long been well-documented. But in this novel, Márquez portrays a more ‘human’ Bolívar languishing in a state of ill-health and powerlessness, for which Bell-Villada deservedly praises Márquez:

García Márquez, then, has done an admirable job of “humanizing” Bolívar, of affectionately bringing the great man down to earth as had never been done before. For so singular an achievement the novel will long be remembered, in particular by the educated denizens of Colombia and the neighboring region. After having read The General in His Labyrinth, one cannot think of Simón Bolívar, or encounter his name or a picture or a statue of him, without the Gabo version welling up as a major response, a counter-model, in one’s mind. (García Márquez 235)