Representation of Colombian political history – A study of the selected novels of Gabriel García Márquez

Abstract

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO ASSAM UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFULMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

By

BHATIMA BARMAN
Ph.D. Registration No.: Ph.D/1054/2010
Date- 05/04/2010

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
SUNITI KUMAR CHATTOPADHYAY SCHOOL OF ENGLISH & FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDIES
ASSAM UNIVERSITY
SILCHAR – 788 011, INDIA
2013
In a century and more after independence South America had become a byword for political instability and could, but for widespread ignorance of its affairs, have become no less a byword for social immobility. It was notorious for civil wars, revolutions, coups, political assassinations and shortlived constitutions, while at the same time it entrenched extreme social and economic injustice. Its basic needs were the reverse of its experience; namely, political stability and social and economic change. (Calvocoressi 641)

Latin America inherited an anachronistic and disordered socio-political legacy which was further debased and despoiled by the few but powerful oligarchy who controlled the newly independent nations. The struggle for power and rule led to numerous civil wars, coups and revolts that eventually created extreme political, economic and social disorder and instability. Persistent political instability and social disorder led most of the nations to fall under dictatorial regimes. Dictatorships and repressive military regimes have been a constant and chronic feature in the Latin American political scenario.

Colombian politics was mired in the intense rivalry between its two political parties — the Conservatives and the Liberals. Separated by ideological differences, the rivalry between them has been the cause of the numerous civil wars and internal conflicts:

In Colombia the political battle lines were quickly drawn between the Liberals and the Conservatives, each of which had diametrically opposed political agendas. The Liberals advocated regional autonomy, reduced power for the Catholic Church, and free international
commerce. Conservatives, many of whom belonged to the landed aristocracy, favored a strong central government and church, on which their political power and wealth directly depended.

The 19th century witnessed the rise of many charismatic caudillos, or strongmen (see entry on Caudillismo and Dictatorship), whose lack of political experience and leadership helped fuel the numerous bloody civil wars which ravaged not only Colombia but many of the fledgling independent countries of Latin America. The Liberal/Conservative paradigm, under many different names, has dominated much of Colombian and Latin American history up to the present day. In Colombia, two of the most internecine conflicts were The Thousand Days War (1899-1902) and the period designated as la Violencia (The Violence), 1948 to 1965, during which an undeclared civil war claimed the lives of some 200,000 to 300,000 people. (Sims 134)

Such statistics simply reveal the number of deaths and casualties. But who is going to account for the indescribable loss and trauma experienced? Caught amidst political battles, economic upheavals, social chaos and cultural complexities; the common man has always been the worst sufferer. The sense of uncertainty and fear, the scars of violence, the deprivation of rights, the unfulfilled promises of progress, and the overarching sense of futility of such a life become themes of concern — a need for deliberation and reflection on the Latin American predicament. In Colombia — “a country of de facto powers” (264) as Marco Palacios says, where the systems of judiciary, police and civil government were mere facades; the common man had to bear the maximum brunt of its reactionary political and social system. García Márquez’s experiences as a common Colombian national and later on as a journalist
and writer would give shape to his political ideas and determine his affiliations. His socialist sympathies are reflected in his activism as well as in his literary productions.

In the thesis, I have made an attempt to study the selected novels of García Márquez vis-à-vis his political standpoint and how his fictions are effective in reflecting or representing the turbulent political history of Colombia and its effects on the people. The novels selected for study are *No One Writes to the Colonel (No One)*, *In Evil Hour, One Hundred Years of Solitude (One Hundred)*, *The Autumn of the Patriarch (The Autumn)*, and *The General in His Labyrinth (The General)*.

The first chapter of the thesis will consist of certain important phases and concerns of Latin American political history (with added reference to Colombian political history, in particular) as well as a brief study of Latin American literature which is closely connected to the socio-political and cultural concerns of the continent. This is followed by a biographical study of Márquez’s life and career, the vital connection between his political experiences and literary productions, his political activities and involvements which reflect his ethics as well as the dominant concern of his role and contribution as a writer. Aspects of literary representation will also be discussed within this chapter. For an easy reading, this introductory chapter will have three sub-headings: Latin American/ Colombian Political History, Latin American/ Colombian Literature, and Márquez’s Life and Works.

The arrival of Columbus initiated the process of European/ Spanish conquest, settlement and finally their rule in the Americas; which led to large scale exploitation — political, economic, and human. The political structures were built on sharply defined hierarchy, where a few Spanish elites held the reins of control. Although
Latin American nations gained independence from Spanish and Portuguese control, ironically, this independence, as it turned out to be was simply a transfer of power from one group of elite to another bunch of elites and the subsequent nation-building processes threw Latin America into an even deeper morass of disastrous political events that would continue to plague Latin America till the twenty-first century.

Colombian politics have always been dominated by two rival parties — the Conservative and the Liberal party. The origin of these two parties lies in the ideological rift that occurred between Simón Bolívar and Francisco de Paula Santander. However, the conflict between them cannot be attributed simply to ideological differences. The actual ground for contest is power and privilege. There have been numerous instances in the Colombian political scenario when one party in power tried to limit or almost eliminate the rival party’s existence. Although removed from the battle for power, the common masses have always been the worst sufferers. Regional antagonism and cultural differences being prominent, Colombian masses were also divided between these two political factions. Colombia has been ravaged by numerous political battles resulting in indescribable loss of life and property — the most notorious being the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1902) and La Violencia (1948-53). Appallingly, Colombia has been registered as the most violent and volatile regions in the hemisphere.

Since its inception, literature has existed and performed as a medium of dialogue and reflection on various socio-political, cultural issues affecting that particular time. A lot has been said and debated about this quality of art — beginning from the mimetic theories of Aristotle to the most recent onslaught of theoretical bombardment upon the nature and intent of this art. Despite this, literature continues
to inform and entertain; and most writers write with this sense of social as well as artistic responsibility. W.J.T. Mitchell’s statement on representation validates this belief as he says that:

... representation, even purely “aesthetic” representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions; one might argue, in fact, that representation is precisely the point where these questions are most likely to enter the literary work. If literature is a ‘representation of life’, then representation is exactly the same place where ‘life’, in all its social and subjective complexity, gets into the literary work. (15)

For Latin American writers and their literature, this is even truer considering the extremely disturbing situation of the region; and in Moss and Valesuk’s words: “For them, as for many Latin Americans, literature has long been as legitimate a medium as any to explore the most compelling political, social and spiritual concerns of the past and the present” (xiii). And to talk of Colombian literature, specifically of the Colombian novel, Raymond Leslie Williams’ statement strongly underpins its nature:

... that many, if not most, Colombian novels have functioned as objects of an ideological dialogue, ... Writing has always occupied an absolutely central role in Colombia and has been intimately associated with politics. Publishing books have been a political act, often subversive in nature. (The Colombian Novel ix)

Writing as a pure literary pursuit was superseded by the inclination of employing their works as a means of political dialogue. Even till the twentieth century in Colombia,
writing was still used as a means of waging a political battle and the acceptance or rejection of novelists and their works corresponded to their political pronouncements and also depended on the dominant political regime. It was much later in the 1950s, following the trend of Asturias, Carpentier, Lispector, Juan Rulfo etc., that writers like Márquez and his contemporaries in Colombia initiated the creation of such fictions whose socio-political concern remained, but also infused in them new literary styles/strategies hitherto nonexistent in Colombian literature.

An intensive study of Márquez’s life and career proves how delicately linked are his fictions with his experiences. Being the grandson of a Liberal war veteran, Márquez was already tutored about political matters and the young child could already feel the corruption in the state as he witnessed his grandfather waiting forever for the war pension, which, ultimately never arrived. However, his first, actual experience was in Bogotá (where he was studying) — when in 1948 Gaitán was murdered in daylight on the streets of Bogotá. Within an hour, Bogotá was on fire and thus ended Márquez’s studies there. For more than a decade after that, Colombia was in a state of siege; with the military cracking down upon any anti-government authority and strict censorship was imposed on newspapers and media. Working as a staff reporter for El espectador in Bogotá in 1954 (during the Rojas Pinilla dictatorship), Márquez was already in the ‘blacklist’. In a country of curfew and censorship where it was difficult to know the reality and to ‘actually’ know what happened or how, it was even more difficult to report the truth. Reality got so distorted that it was almost unbelievable. Yet, Márquez and his newspaper tried to get to the root, and “slowly but with accelerating excitement, he discovered the joy of being a reporter-detective, the creativity of discovering — and in a way inventing —
the truth, the power of shaping and even changing reality for tens of thousands of people” (Martin, *Gabriel García Márquez* 171). Eventually, he was sent to Europe (as threat to his life became imminent) and *El espectador* was forced to shut down. Those times were also the heights of the Cold War. While in Europe — Márquez (in order to see ‘socialism in practice’ which he would later say) travelled through East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and even went down to the Soviet Union. Working as a journalist in Caracas, he witnessed the fall of the dictator Pérez Jiménez but it was the fall of Batista in Cuba which changed the whole course of direction in his life. The Cuban Revolution ushered in some hope of change in Latin American politics. Enthusiastic about Castro’s Cuban Revolution, Márquez began working for the Cuba-supported Prensa Latina and eventually Márquez went on to become one of Castro’s most trusted friends. Márquez’s political stance and his friendship with Castro resulted in his being blacklisted even in the USA and for three long decades he was denied entry into USA until Bill Clinton invited him.

Márquez’s varied experiences and his broadening world view — right from the days of being a clandestine member of the Colombian Communist Party to the time of forging friendship with men like Castro, General Omar Torrijos, he had come a long way. Political maturity also brought about changes in his literary practices. There is visible difference in his earlier works (like *In Evil Hour, No One Writes to the Colonel*) and those written after *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Márquez’s memories and reminiscences are a vital part of his writing; since most of his stories, characters and the essence in them bear testimony to his eventful past and as Mariana Solanet says, his memories and reminiscences are “the base material from which he
recycles emotions” (5). Power, suffering, solitude and death — these themes constantly appear in his fictions.

As the thesis intends to study Márquez’s selected novels vis-à-vis his socio-political concerns; the second chapter will be the study of his two early novels— *No One Writes to the Colonel* and *In Evil Hour*, both of which were written in the backdrop of the intensely violent period of *la violencia*. The chapter has been entitled: “Power, Protest and Justice in *No One Writes to the Colonel* and *In Evil Hour*”. As the title of the chapter suggests, the themes of power and protest, as well as that of justice are played out here. The period of *la violencia* has been one of the most violent and regressive periods in the history of Colombia, when almost all civil rights were suspended and curfews and censorships prevailed for decades. It is the common man who suffers the most in such situations and the conditions are aggravated when the authorities in power make use or rather abuse the absolute powers in their hands, thus further rendering the common man helpless and powerless.

In *No One*, a septuagenarian Colonel waits endlessly for a letter which would confirm his war pension. However, his sacrifices as a war veteran goes unrecognized as he never receives the pension till the end of the novel. The stoical figure of the Colonel is pitted against an oppressive and corrupt system. His son was shot dead by the authorities for circulating clandestine papers. He and his wife are left only with a fighting cock — Agustín’s legacy; and this fighting cock becomes a symbol of resistance against the reactionary government. At a point when the Colonel’s poverty brings him at the juncture of selling away the cock; he makes the biggest decision to nurture the cock for an upcoming cockfight and thus keeps alive the hopes and
resistance of the people of the town as well as his own hope of justice and deliverance.

*In Evil Hour* shares the social and political milieu with *No One*; where the citizens have to endure a return to a regime of curfews, violence and corruption after a period of relative and short-lived peace. It is the story of an unnamed town where certain lampoons threaten to disturb the prevailing peace. The lampoons which are posted in the doors of respected families of the town expose the moral depravity running deep within the respectable households. These lampoons which are extremely subversive in nature, however, are like the tips of an iceberg. In a town where political and personal immorality merged, the lampoons were just a media of exposing what almost everyone knew but could never make them public. At a deeper, political level, Márquez shows that the prevailing atmosphere of peace was just a façade. As the lampoons were slowly and steadily unearthing the dark secrets of the respectable families of the town and was gradually destabilizing the so-called peace that was being established for a while; in a more symbolic and stronger way the clandestine papers (which were circulated by people who opposed the regime) would steadily be exposing the atrocities of a ruthless, autocratic government which was trying hard to put up a show that peace prevailed, law was maintained and that justice was being delivered. Márquez’s censure of power and oppression is evident as the common people have to fight everyday for survival. The casualness with which a life of curfew and censorship is lived satirises the absurd situation when terror and fear of death becomes normality.

Justice was not yet delivered in *No One*, yet the Colonel waited patiently for it. In *In Evil Hour*, we never learn whether there ever will be any retribution for the
various injustices that the people had to suffer. In *No One*, the fighting cock becomes the symbol of hope — the hope of a better future. In *In Evil Hour*, the news of guerrilla groups being formed to resist the onslaught of mass political extermination and injustice brings the only ray of hope. Power was yielded by the powerful. But that did not stop people from protesting. These two early novels by Márquez which takes place in small, unnamed towns are befitting narratives of resilience shown by common people against the vices of absolute power. Although he writes about oppression, grave political injustice and deaths — amidst the bleak reality lies a possibility of hope brought about by the resilience of the common man. It is this very human will and courage of the common man that sustains hope against indescribable loss and suffering.

The third chapter is entitled: “Solitude and Suffering in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*”.

Solitude is a theme which constantly surfaces in Márquez’s fictions. In the context of Latin American political scenario as well as its constant preoccupation with its marginalized position vis-à-vis its European colonizers, ‘solitude’ has more of a political connotation than mere psychological concern. As according to Stephen Minta, for Márquez — ‘solitude’ connotes a concern for Latin America’s subordinate and peripheral status to foreign/imperial powers:

**Solitude** . . . fascinates him as an expression of the collective isolation of Latin American people, a people for whom history has seemed a process to be endured rather than created, a people divorced from a sense of history because theirs has been written by outsiders, a people
condemned to a peripheral role in relation to a greater world whose limits have been defined elsewhere. (qtd. in Erickson 173)

The one hundred years of the history of Macondo can be said to be a compact history of Latin America — albeit, politically satirical and demystified.

The entire narrative of One Hundred Years of Solitude recreates the history of the American subcontinent subtly — sometimes seriously and at other times parodically. The founding of the remote, isolated village of Macondo; the course of its development from an idyllic, peaceful place to a region of conflict (during the civil wars) to its final ruined state (after the Banana massacre)— comprises the hundred years of Macondo; and as Patricia Murray states: “While these events parallel a chronological period in Colombian history, the ‘cien años’ also represent a metaphorical hundred years which reach back to the period of Discovery and Conquest as well as forward to post-colonial attempts to heal a history of fragmentation and oppression” (268). Columbus’s ‘encounter’ with America initiated the process of conquest, domination, annihilation of the native population and finally the imposition of imperial rule. Latin America and its populations had always occupied fringe positions in every matter— be it political participation, economic benefits or technological advancements.

Macondo was founded by the patriarch José Arcadio Buendía with the ‘dream’ of building an illuminated city made of glass; which only turns out to be a mirage by the end of the novel. The last member of the Buendía family realized that the entire life and history of Macondo and of the Buendía’s as well as their annihilation was predetermined. Conceived as a utopia, Macondo turns more into a forlorn, dystopic
place. It goes through the phases of settlement, political unrest, industrialization, and economic downturns etc; which are resonant of the various phases of colonial and post-colonial Latin America.

Macondo’s isolation and solitude brings about the suffering of its people. They are never the controllers of their own destiny. Márquez shows that since the beginning ‘outer’ forces make a big impact in the life of Macondo. The modern inventions brought into Macondo by the gypsies fill them with awe and surprise which reflects their ignorance and backwardness as well as exposes their vulnerability. Political unrest is also brought about by ‘outer’ influences. For years, Macondo was outside the political sphere of the central government but as it entered the peripheries of matters of politics, it plunged into years of unrest and violence. Even the so-called and short-lived economic development was brought about by the Banana Company. The banana workers’ massacre can be said to be the final showdown of the narrative, after which Macondo’s decline begins. The Macondans act as mere puppets in the hands of outer forces. Their solitude and isolation and their subsequent sufferings pinpoint “the powerlessness that results from Latin America’s peripheral relation to the ‘greater world’ that determines its history . . .” (Erickson 173-4).

The fourth chapter is: “Power vs. Death and Decay in The Autumn of the Patriarch and The General in His Labyrinth”.

Dictatorships have been a “painful, complex, long-standing historical reality” (Bell-Villada, García Márquez 168) for the people of most Latin American nations. The emergence of caudillos or dictators has their origin in power. The figure of the caudillo/dictator/gaucho (as they are differently called in Latin America) has had an
everlasting presence in most Latin American nations. Dictatorship regimes have most often been marked by extreme repression, forceful suppression of political opponents, press censorships and gross violations of human rights; as well as an inclination for retaining absolute powers for immeasurably long periods of time.

In the novel, the Patriarch’s despotism, cruelty, abusive and repulsive sexuality and an almost anti-human stance arises out of power. The entire narrative is Márquez’s diatribe against tyranny and gross manipulation of power. Death and decay pervades throughout the novel. This dictator rules interminably for centuries echoing the endless dictatorships of Latin America. It is a saga of man’s hunger for power, just as Márquez had intended to create it: “. . . I want it to be a long poem about the solitude of power” (“And Now” 19). As the ‘autumn’ of the title suggests, it depicts the gradual decadence of a solitary, barbaric dictator— who, despite everything clings on to power. With shifting narrative viewpoints, the book carries us through a vortex of endless barbarism and corruption and as Gerald Martin says, this dictator is “one of the most repugnant characters ever created” (Gabriel García Márquez 367). There is no fixed narrator in the novel, hence making way for multiple perspectives which facilitate the usually submerged voices of the oppressive state to emerge. Although the novel surrounds the death of the tyrant, the flashbacks within the narrative aim to satirise the abominable tyrant and his atrocities, and exposes the consequences of abuse of absolute political power.

While the Patriarch is a composite figure of several actual dictators of Latin America, The General in His Labyrinth is based on the most important historical figure of Latin America — Simón Bolívar. Bolívar enjoys a cult-like status in Latin
America: “Children in school are taught to revere him quasi-religiously, while in adult public life the man inspires high-flown political rhetoric beyond measure” (Bell-Villada, *García Márquez* 220). Unlike most biographies and other specialized volumes extolling the greatness of this South American hero, Márquez concentrates on the least documented part of Bolívar’s life— that is, his final stepdown as the President of the newly liberated republics and his final days of life as a sick and powerless man.

Bolívar (till today in Latin America) is an idolized figure whose military and political career remains incomparable till date. He is also known as the Liberator as he carried forward the enormous and daunting task of liberating the Latin American nations from Spanish imperial rule. However, in *The General in His Labyrinth*, Márquez strips Bolívar of all the powers that he had enjoyed as the President and a Liberator. His depiction of Bolívar as not just a national hero but also as a mortal, ailing man is almost iconoclastic; considering the fact that “. . . Bolívar has since been mythologised almost to the point of deification” (Martin, “The General” 107). The themes of solitude, power, and powerlessness are revisited here. Márquez’s depiction of Bolívar’s waning power and glory serves as a demystified portrayal of Latin America’s iconic, powerful, historical figure.

The fifth chapter is the concluding chapter which sums up the findings of the previous chapters.

Márquez is considered to be among the most representative of writers in Latin America — someone who has read the pulse of the continent perfectly. Latin
America’s enormous socio-political complications, cultural richness, and racial diversities finds place in Márquez’s fictions. As Gerald Martin says, “the continent’s characteristic and persistent alternation between utopia and apocalypse, euphoria and black despair” (“The Novel of a Continent” 634) is best embodied in his works.

To begin with, the most persistent feature in his works is his oblique as well as direct censure of power (the use and abuse of power, especially); followed by a critique of the undemocratic, repressive political systems where the common man is the worst sufferer. He is relentlessly satirical of the corrupt nature of power as well as of those who perpetuate conditions of dependency and suffering.

In both *No One* and *In Evil Hour*, the societies depicted are deeply mired in corruption, censorships, and severe repression. The fact that even a harmless, funeral procession (in *No One*) is not allowed to pass peacefully, subtly hints at how normal lives are affected in such oppressive states. In *No One* the Colonel’s desperate story is just a fraction of a brutal reality — a reality which is suffered by many such helpless people across the continent. The image of the septuagenarian Colonel waiting futilely for a letter which would confirm his pension becomes an image of utter hopelessness and helplessness. In *In Evil Hour*, the focus broadens from a single individual to an entire community where a few subversive lampoons threatens to expose the moral and political depravity of the society and break down the façade of peace and normalcy. In both the novels however, despite severe repression and brutality — the common man’s resilience and courage to fight the odds instills hope for a better future.
With *One Hundred*, Márquez enlarges his vision and scope to encapsulate the continent’s prejudices and predicament. The story of the one hundred years of Macondo is both a serious rewriting of the history of the continent as well as a parodic subversion of the usual European (and also North American) hegemonic attitude and perspective towards the continent. Márquez parodies and satirises almost every aspect of Spanish colonialism in Latin America as well as ironically reflects on the present Latin American political scenario (after independence from colonial domination). The endless civil wars, power struggle, economic dependence etc., are all satirical reflections on a past history created out of violence and ruthless brutality as well as a fearsome present reality of anarchy and despotism.

Although magical and bizarre events happen, they are just a part of the everyday reality of Macondo. Moreover, certain ‘magical’ or rationally inexplicable events have more of political connotations. For example, the insomnia plague that threatens to erase every memory of the Macondans is a purposeful attack on the history of the Spanish Conquest over the Americas which resulted in a massive annihilation of many Native American tribes, their culture, artifacts, language etc. This insomnia plague precedes a more destructive event, when three thousand workers of the Banana Company are murdered and the repressive forces make every attempt to erase the memory of the massacre from the pages of history of Macondo.

The pages of *The Autumn* are filled with even more violence and brutality than the early three novels. The figure of the dictator or the caudillo is a constant figure in the Latin American political scenario. After independence from Spain, most Latin American countries fell under dictatorship regimes. Despotism and anarchy has been
a chronic feature of most of the nations. In *The Autumn*, the dictator’s interminably long rule is a reminder of centuries of despotism suffered under various repressive regimes. Violence, brutality and mayhem are depicted in such horrific terms and in constant repetition that there seems to be no end to the absurd situation of living under dictatorial rule.

Through the story of Bolívar in *The General*, Márquez again tries to delve deep into the mechanism of power. The various political struggles and the resultant chaos and instability are a result of the greed for power. Bolívar is the first iconic, historical figure of a powerful hero whose fame and glory rests in his achievements as a warrior and an administrator. The endless wars, conspiracies, power struggle etc. creates a labyrinthine mess from which Bolívar finds it difficult to come out. The “labyrinth” is a familiar term and concept in relation to Latin American politics and life; as conquests, peace, wars, bloodshed etc. keeps on repeating, thus forming a vicious circle.

Celebrated Chinese novelist Mo Yan spoke in his Nobel lecture (2012) that he finds writing novels dealing with social realities to be a challenge:

\[\ldots\] not because I’m afraid of being openly critical of the darker aspects of society, but because heated emotions and anger allow politics to suppress literature and transform a novel into reportage of a social event. As a member of society, a novelist is entitled to his own stance and viewpoint, but when he is writing he must take a humanistic stance, and write accordingly. Only then can literature not just
originate in events, but transcend them, not just show concern for politics but be greater than politics. ("Nobel Lecture — Storytellers")

Márquez’s works are deeply entrenched in the socio-political milieu of the Latin American continent. Despite the vital link between his ideologies and his literary creations, he has never compromised with the finer nuances of art. His literary creations prove his deep commitment towards art and society, and it is through his art and activism that he envisions a better future for Latin America.