



Research Paper

## The Treatment of Myth, Solitude and History in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Selected Works: A Reassessment

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### Abstract:

Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014) is one of the greatest as well as most influential figures in Latin American history in each of his three activities as a writer: that of novelist, short story writer and journalist. Like all great works of literature, his novels and short stories explore, both in breadth and in depth, what it is to be a human being and yet they address specific historical moments and specific political circumstances. His ability to encompass mythical and historical characters and incidents as well as to create a new story and meaning that unite the 'real' and the marvelous in a real way makes his work equitable and genuine. The paper will explore how Marquez has expounded the idea of solitude and treated elements of myth and history in some of his representative works of fiction to depict the sanguinary and inhuman history of Latin America. Regarding the unique isolation of Latin America within a globalizing world, Marquez says, 'The immeasurable violence and pain of our history are the result of age-old inequities and untold bitterness... Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable, and this is the very scale of our solitude' (Marquez, Nobel Lecture). He has shown the ultimate loneliness in his selected writings through his characters who face and experience unresolved and unjustifiable solitariness to show how the people of Latin America have been isolated from the developed world.

**Key words:** Marquez, History, Solitude, Myth, Latin America, Nobel Lecture, Magic Realism.

Received 13 Oct., 2022; Revised 26 Oct., 2022; Accepted 28 Oct., 2022 © The author(s) 2022.  
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### I. Introduction:

The most renowned writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014) is denominated with a forte for blending the everyday with the miraculous, the historical with the fabulous, and psychological realism with surreal flights of fancy. These multiple perspectives are especially appropriate to the unique reality of Latin America that was torn by civil war and ravaged by imperialism. During the Nobel Lecture 'The Solitude of Latin America' in 1982, Marquez explained Latin America as a substance of history produced from continuance of long time maladministration. He further explained how the horrific past and present of much of Latin America lends itself to magic realism due to its ability to convey the 'unearthly tidings of Latin America' (Marquez, Nobel Lecture). Through magic realism he conveys a reality that incorporates myth, history, magic, superstition, supernaturalism and of course solitude which are infused into the world of Latin America. He told *The New York Times*: 'I must try and break through the clichés about Latin America. Superpowers and other outsiders have fought over us for centuries in ways that have nothing to do with our problems. In reality we are all alone' (Valencia, 2014).

'History' in its political appropriation coalesces with the sensorial fabric of myth; 'myth' in turn verifies the monolithic claims of dogmatic history. In cultural theory, one admits, there are voluminous histories, there are countless myths; perhaps, as many as may be examined from the penumbral zone of mnemonic retrospection. Marquez's works are replete with allusions to myths. A myth is an ancient story or set of stories especially explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts. The use of myth in Marquez's novels and short stories allows us to look deeper into the meaning of what Marquez was trying to convey. Bearing in mind Marquez' penchant for weaving short-stories, the 'teller' could be projected as the frame-narrator or point to the diverse characters that reside in the lush story-scape. Almost every minor character in Marquez' collection is a unique 'teller' of stories, inexorably involved in the daunting process of the

'creation of myth' as infinitum: each restyles the other's micro-story by interpreting dunes in history from an idiosyncratic point of view. It is obvious, Marquez exerts immense authorial reticence in modeling his characters; they are permitted to voice their beliefs in their own indigenous style – in the visual language of fable, tale and lore – as their mythical-view remains pristinely untainted by the dominant thrust of mainstream philosophies in culture and history.

Almost all critics who have dealt with the presence of myth in magic realism have recognized it in Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the work in which that presence is most obtrusive and developed. The text's awareness of itself as literature becomes a key to the understanding of the mythical-historical essence of the novel. Amaranta Ursula dies after the birth of her child, Aureliano wanders in grief through the ruins of Macondo, the baby is devoured by the ants, and ultimately, the manuscripts are deciphered. As Melquiades had announced to Aureliano Segundo, the manuscripts could be understood only when they had reached one hundred years. And it is evident that the manuscripts contain the story of the family— that is, the novel itself. However, Aureliano remembers the prophetic line: "The first of the line is tied to a tree and the last is being eaten by the ants" (*Solitude* 381). Another instance of the mythical events that the novel says itself in chapter 16: 'It rained for four years, eleven months, and two days' (*Solitude* 320). The Buendia family's story is recorded for posterity as history but is cast in the language of myth and preserved as literature through the manuscripts of Melquiades. Thus *One Hundred Years of Solitude* meta-fiction challenges the reader to an understanding of the story of Latin America as it is told through myth and through the myths of history. *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* (1955) is home to a galaxy of enchanting minor characters who express their views in a stream of micro narratives. Of the lot, the old man, Pelayo and Elisenda are alone recognized as major characters. In accomplishing this slant in storyline, Marquez eliminates the need for an insular protagonist who might have else erected a solitary standpoint that disregards the truce of myth. *The Last Voyage of the Ghost Ship* (1955) is written in the stream-of-conscious technique and is centred round the image of a mysterious ship, indeed. The title recommends a 'ghost ship', alluding to a boy's very much expertise of confronting a spectre in the past. Curiously, the ship is gradually given a mythic status, rhetorically reconstructed purely through the aid of memory.

Marquez has presented solitude, as his vital tool, to present the ultimate reality of Latin America that was torn by civil war and ravaged by imperialism. Solitude, as it is regarded, is the state or quality of being alone or remote from others. Regarding the unique isolation of Latin America within a globalizing world, Marquez says, superpowers and other outsiders have fought over us for centuries in ways that have nothing to do with our problems. In reality we are all alone. In his Nobel acceptance speech Marquez said: 'I dare to think it is this oversized reality, and not just its literary expression, that has deserved the attention of the *Swedish Academy of Letters*. A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this wandering and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune... is the crux of our solitude' (Marquez, *Nobel Lecture*). He has shown the ultimate 'loneliness' in his writings through his characters who faces and experiences unresolved and unjustifiable solitariness to show how people of Latin America have been isolated from the developed world. Marquez described the book *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) as "a poem on the solitude of power," painting the lead character as an eternal dictator doomed to the same terrible cycle of rising to power only to fall over and over again. He perfectly creates the perplexing image of a fictitious Caribbean dictator, and celebrates the 'solitude' of the protagonist as he slowly becomes imprisoned in the vicious web of power. In his earliest writing *Leaf Storm* (1955), Marquez employs the character the Doctor who lives a life of total solitude. He lives by himself, with nothing of personal value, and does not even leave his house for ten full years. Eventually, the Doctor will commit suicide, the most radical form of solitude. It may be further noted that Marquez also portrays solitude through the town of Macondo, which is isolated geographically.

Marquez's short story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* (1955) is pervaded with the theme of solitude as well. Since no one knows exactly what or who "that nightmare" is after he appears at the home of Pelayo and Elisenda, the old man, 'impeded by his enormous wings', becomes isolated as an oddity, who represents himself as an 'outsider' and live in 'solitude' (Borchert 161). Being the only winged man among a race of wingless humans has obvious implications for alienation, and the abuse suffered at the hands of the cruel and curious humans only reinforces the winged man's psychological solitude. As George R. McMurray states in *Gabriel Garcia Marquez*, 'the theme of solitude emerges from the angel's uncommunicative nature and isolation from all men' (Holland 31). The final theme that is presented to readers in *No One Writes to the Colonel*, once again, is the theme of solitude, a theme that ranges throughout Garcia Marquez's works. There is the solitude inflicted upon the town by its geographic isolation. Its only contact with the outside world takes place once a week in the form of mail. The long wait of the colonel is another act of solitude. He is an individual acting alone, in the same way that the colonel of *Leaf Storm* acts alone to bury the foreign doctor of the novella, against the will of the townspeople. If the colonel's wait is an act of solitude, his wife's lifestyle is even more so. She

only leaves the house once, to try to sell the clock and the painting (the only two possessions, other than the rooster, that they have left). The two of them form a couple that lives in solitude. *Love in the time of Cholera* (1985) also shows us the potential themes concerning the relationship between life and death, and characters live in solitude for long years.

Marquez experiments with utmost reality in order to illustrate and provide commentary on the concerns he has when the past is forgotten or inaccurately conveyed. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Marquez more explicitly focuses on what happens when memory is erased and history is forgotten. The result is narratives that critique passiveness and demonstrate that people should actually take active roles when an unknown entity or foreign government tries to invade and change the status quo and history. He addresses war, suffering and death with clarity and political slant. Colombia had witnessed war of a thousand days (1899-1902), government brutality known as *La Violencia* (1948-1958), and two hundred thousand politically motivated deaths. His writings often concerned historical tragedies, such as civil wars, the rule of a dictator or an act of brutality by the army against its own people, the revival of political violence before and after the presidential election of 1946, open guerrilla warfare, and finally disjointed fighting under the Liberal and Conservative coalition of the 'National Front' from 1958-1975. Marquez asserts that there's not a single line in his writings which is not based on history. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's magnum opus *One Hundred Years of Solitude* offers numerous opportunities for courses on Latin American history, politics, culture, and civilization. It is a work of fiction, but the happenings of this novel directly parallel the regional history of the Caribbean coast of Colombia along with its interactions with Bogotá (the capitol of Colombia) and the surrounding nation. At some point in the novel Marquez narrates about the *massacre de las bananeras*— as the repression of a strike against the United Fruit Company in 1928 is now generally known, when 3000 workers were slaughtered by the Colombian army. However, the key character of Colonel Aureliano Buendia, the banana strike and massacre, and the ultimate evolution of the town of Macondo are all subtle retellings of actual political and social realities (Caro and Ortega 40). Jeffrey Gray narrates in "History, Erasure, and Magical Realism: Exploration, Colonization, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*", 'Indeed, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* at times seems a parable of and for Latin America. The novel represented a stylistic and conceptual revolution, but also an engagement— if not always direct—with the history of Latin America, notably its history of neocolonialism at the hands of the United States' (Henao 3). Marquez's writings *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* and *No One Writes to the Colonel* bear an irrefutable relevance to the Latin American history of revolutions and independence, and its shift from collective dreams to infernal nightmares in the very passage from colonial engagement to disengagement. During his Nobel Lecture, Marquez explained: 'Latin America, especially Carrabeo region, as a substance of history produced from continuance of longtime maladministration' (Nobel Lecture: *The Solitude of Latin America*). Gabriel Garcia Marquez has been a major exponent of Latin American syndromes in fiction. His superior works, in some way or the other, record the miasma of the old colonial days, critique the depletion of postcolonial dreams and negotiate with the emerging neocolonial realities.

*The Autumn of the Patriarch* is a phantasmagorical portrait of a Latin American dictator who governs and tyrannizes over his people for a magically real period of more than two centuries, and after multiple fake deaths, he finally dies in a most ignoble manner, his dead body being feasted over by vultures. It is highly noted that, Military dictatorship has been a common feature of postcolonial Latin America. As a matter of fact few Latin American countries were spared of dictatorial regimes. To name a few instances, three Somozas in Nicaragua consolidated dynasty rule from 1936 to 1979. In Chile General Pinochet, in a US-backed bloody coup, overthrew the first Marxist elected president Salvador Allende in 1973. Alfredo Stroessner, the second longest serving dictator, ruled Paraguay for 35 years. These and many more were the regimes who brutally repressed, exiled and killed millions (Basak 35). Precisely from this point of view *The Autumn of the Patriarch* is a serious postcolonial critique on *de facto* colonialism and neo-colonialism, dictatorships and hegemony.

The relationship Marquez has with Colombia and his awareness of the imbalance of power in Latin America pushes him to become concerned with history and the way stories are told. Through his use of 'solitude' Marquez criticizes the two superpowers, (i.e.) *Eastern Bloc* (Soviet Union and its Satellite States [1]) and *Western Bloc* (The United States, its NATO allies and others), and especially 'cold war' [2] (1947-1989) that altered Latin America's relationship to the United States profoundly, as the region became a battleground between two competing ideological system— Capitalism and Communism. Thus, Latin America, which had been such a flashpoint during the cold war, fell off the Geopolitical map. No longer of strategic value, Latin America was left to rebuild its shattered countries with little or no assistance from either of the two superpowers. In Nobel Lecture ceremony Marquez speaks clearly: 'No: the violence and disproportionate misery of our history are the result of secular injustice and infinite bitterness and not a plot hatched three thousands leagues distance from our home...two great masters of the world' (Nobel Lecture: *The Solitude of Latin America*). However, he explained why the people of Latin America have been isolated from the developed world. He, further, says that, the conventional means, i.e. the disposition of Latin American people, has become so antithetical to that of the developed world that their lives seem very unrealistic. There is very little hope of

improvement left in the lives of these people. Marquez believes that, 'It is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth'. (Nobel Lecture: *The Solitude of Latin America*) Marquez demonstrates this running theme in many of his works. His works also suggest that to know history and write about history and narrative is to be in power, adding authorship to authority. It is regarded that all his novels and short stories are fulfilled with historical elements, myths, and ultimate 'solitude', and these myths along with other elements and events in the fictions recount a large portion of Colombian history in particular and Latin American history in General.

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[1] **Satellite States:** A Satellite State is a political term for a country that is formally independent, but under heavy political, economic and military influence or control by another country. The term was coined by analogy to planetary objects orbiting a larger object, such as smaller moons revolving around larger planets, and the term "Satellite State" first came into use in 1924, used to describe the East European countries belonging to the *Warsaw Pact* (a collective defense treaty established by the Soviet Union and seven other Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe) during the Cold war. As used for Central and Eastern European countries it implies that the countries in question were 'satellites' under the hegemony of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Satellite states were Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany, Yugoslavia, and Albania. They experienced, under Soviet domination, a totalitarian regime comparable to that prevailing in the USSR. (Bruegel 32-37)

[2] **Cold War:** The Cold War was a period (1945-1991) of geopolitical tension between the United States with its allies (The Western European countries), and the Soviet Union and its satellite states (The Eastern European countries) after World War II. The two superpowers were primarily engaged in an ideological war between the capitalist USA and the communist Soviet Union. The Cold War finally came to an end in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. (Nehring 920-949, Robert McMahon).