

Matrix of Hunger and Politics in Garcia Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel: A Materialistic Necropsy*

Mr. Arif Mahammad Chaprasi

Research Scholar (Ph.D), Department of English,
Seacom Skills University, Shantiniketan, West Bengal.

Abstract

Latin American literature is indisputably exceptional for the presence of different iconic figures like Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014) whose masterpiece writing *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1958) bears a strong relevance to the Latin American history of revolutions and independence and it experiences her post-colonial political reality, violence, civil war, split of the nation into the Liberals and the Conservatives, and of course how the colonial and neo-colonial powers had conveniently forgotten to listen to the anxieties of those who were on the margins. In the novel *No One Writes to the Colonel* Marquez has evidently stated the deplorable and dire condition of a septuagenarian Colonel and his asthmatic wife, who are living in the utmost and unbearable poverty during the military governance of Colombia, expecting for the unexpected letter of pension to arrive but the letter never came throughout the novel. The septuagenarian couple, who have lost their only son to political oppression, is struggling with poverty and financial fragility. However, the corruption of the local and national officials is obvious which Garcia Marquez inquires into throughout the novel by using references to censorship and the impact of government on society. The aim of this paper will be to focus on the pathetic situation of Colonel during political unrest in Colombia and to examine how he kept struggle and maintained dignity in the face of hardships. Narratives like those of the Colonel were always instrumental in imparting the lessons of empowerment to a nation that has long been subjected to several forms of exploitations.

Keywords: Colonel, Latin America, Exploitation, Poverty, Colombia, Post-colonial.

The concept of “Latin America” as a literary class predominantly consists of a widespread literary body that has a proneness to reflect the political unrests and conflicts. Most of the Latin American writers have initiated their works at the regional level and then widen their perspective to encompass the national level, i.e. considering Latin America as a country. As a most outstanding Latin American writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s literary discourse essentially delineates the actual contexts, characters and events of Latin America in general, and Colombia in particular. In the 1950s, the Latin American writers tried to write more about the national predicaments and succeeded to absorb an audience out of Latin America. Undoubtedly, a shining example of this genre is Marquez’s *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1958) that represents the social and political peculiarities of Colombia and Latin America continent which

has been mattered to many forms of outrage, oppression and injustice right from the opening of the colonial times and that mode of injustice and oppression continued even after the independence. The exploitation and inequity of the powerless classes of the society has been the most general modus operandum protected by those in power especially during the military government in Latin America, and through this rules of procedure, higher authority (government) extracted the marginal people's hope, optimism, promise and prospect.

The Colonel in *No One Writes to the Colonel* is one such marginal figure who has been deprived from the basic right to get his promised pension to have a handsome living. *No One Writes to the Colonel*, basically, is an epic of demystified postcolonial hunger, the hunger that eats up the bone marrow of independence. Naturally, a new matrix emerges besides violence: it is the matrix of hunger and poverty, in other words, the matrix of money. Garcia Marquez here employs the socialist matrix of hunger to measure the depth of the Colonel couple's penury and patience compounded by the domestic and political economy of Colombia in a post-independence conundrum. The novel begins with a grim snapshot of poverty.

One October morning 'the Colonel took the top off the coffee can and saw that there was only one little spoonful left. He removed the pot from the fire, poured half the water onto the earthen floor, and scraped the inside of the can with a knife until the last scrapings of the ground coffee, mixed with bits of rust, fell into the pot.

(*Colonel 1*)

A seventy-five-year-old Colonel and his chronically asthmatic wife are struggling against poverty in a remote river town lost in the forests of northern Colombia. He is a veteran of the Liberal army which fought in the 'War of a Thousand Days' against the oppressive and undemocratic Conservative regime over fifty years before and for the last fifteen years he has been expecting to hear news of the pension which survivors of that conflict were promised by a recent government. As novel narrates: 'for nearly sixty years, since the end of the last civil war, the Colonel had done nothing else but wait.' Every day he walks to the post office to see if a letter has come but even after the lapse of fifteen long years he had to return empty handed. So the poverty has been an old companion to the family but it has settled rather menacingly after the death of their son Augustine nine months ago, as he was murdered by those in power 'for distributing clandestine literature' (*Colonel 10*).

Garcia Marquez has clearly narrated the political outrage and unrest that Colombia has endured for two generations from the civil wars of the nineteenth century right through to the twentieth century. The old Colonel and his wife, and those who are in power represent the older generation and Augustine and his friends represent the younger generation. In the early part of twentieth century, Colombia had the bitter experience of a series civil wars and was affected by several incidents of violence that have been fictionalized in *No One Writes to the Colonel* which is set during the time of 'La Violencia' (1948-1968) when Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a more popular, erudite Liberal leader, was assassinated in a crowded street in Bogota on 9th April 1948 by a Conservative fanatic who claimed that he was supported by the powerful forces. The centre of Bogota, the capital of Colombia, became the stage of violence created by the Liberal rioters who sacked the most governmental buildings, trashed many churches and overturned the cars and trolleys (Halka 38). However, the bloody and informal civil war that continued from 1948 to 1968,

affected half of the century, and more than two hundred thousand people were killed, mostly in rural areas. The origins of violence can be traced back to the early part of nineteenth century when Colombia had newly got its independence and the country underwent some major changes and lost its sovereignty.

However, *No One Writes to the Colonel* examines the effect of 'La Violencia' in Colombia. The characters live under various unreasonable situations like curfew, press censorship, and underground newspapers and Garcia Marquez does delineate the evil nature and the inequity of times like 'La Violencia'. It is violence that has made the Colonel and his asthmatic wife literally orphan. Their only son Augustine was shot dead nine months before at the cock-fights by police for distributing 'clandestine literature'. As the Colonel's wife remarks in frustration: 'we are the orphans of our son' (*Colonel* 10). Since Augustine's death the economic condition of the grief-stricken Colonel and his wife has gone from bad to worse, and by the time the novel begins they are going hungry but still trying desperately to keep up appearances. The seventy-five year old war veteran Colonel lives with his ailing wife in a house that has already been mortgaged, the whitewash of the worn-out walls is flaking off, and water leaks through its palm-thatched roof when it rains heavily. The Colonel earns nothing and he has been 'waiting for a letter of war pension for the last fifteen years' but it never comes (23). The Colonel bitterly remarks: 'the only thing it's good for now is to count the stars'. The pair of shoes the Colonel uses are so dog-eared that his wife advises him to throw them away: 'those shoes are ready to throw it' and the Colonel feels desolate (10).

Poverty and indigence has been an old mate to the family but it has settled rather incessantly after the death of their son Augustine nine months ago, and to get some money they have to sell away their son's sewing machine. Nothing valuable is left in the house that can be sold, but only one thing that remains to be sold is the fighting rooster. But the Colonel is determined to keep it, and his wife wants to get rid of it. All this brings the Colonel into conflict with his own ailing wife who, despite her continuing grief over her son, believes that politics and fancy symbolism should be set aside in the interests of the struggle for survival, they have nothing to eat, and if they sell the fighting cock they can earn enough money to live with minimum decency for two or three years. Despite their love and affection for each other, the old couple, after a lifetime together, find themselves at loggerheads. She says scornfully that he is now resigned to waiting and 'you can't eat illusions', to which he replies 'you can't eat them, but they can nourish you'. She retorts, 'you have been waiting all of your life and now you are starving and completely alone'. However, the rooster has been developed in the novel *No One Writes to the Colonel* as a catalyst of poverty besides the other roles assigned to it.

Although seemingly portrayed as an old, poverty-stricken helpless and solitary man, the Colonel emerges as a real hero by the end of the novel. He is a rational yet innocuous and almost naïve person who clings on to the hope of receiving the letter which would confirm his war pension. He believes, implicitly, that politics cannot be forgotten precisely because it killed their son and his dignity. His every step towards mitigating hunger is met with a compromise with his innate pride and dignity, and his pragmatic wife snipes at his false notion of dignity: 'you are dying of hunger. You should realize that you can't eat dignity'(46). But ironically she herself suffers from an equal sense of dignity and is equally apprehensive of her neighbours' knowledge of their poverty: 'so now everyone knows we're starving' (45). As the Colonel's wife sums up, 'we put up with hunger so others can eat. It's been the same

story for forty years' (*Colonel* 67). And the moment when she shouts losing her patience 'what do we eat?' and it is a highly abortive synthesis expressed in the Colonel's monosyllabic 'shit'. Although Marquez pens about persecution, political inequity, poverty and deaths, and amidst the somber reality there remains a possibility of hope and prospect brought about by liveliness and rapidity of the common man, be it the Colonel or the other marginal peoples. It is the very human will and valour of the common man that sustains hope and expectation against indefinable loss, poverty, sufferings and hunger, and these form a basic belief in Marquez's work *No One Writes to the Colonel*, a belief which is well-documented in his Noble lecture, entitled "The Solitude of Latin America": "Nevertheless, in the face of oppression, pillage and abandonment, our reply is life. Neither floods nor plagues, nor famines, nor cataclysms, nor even eternal war century after century have managed to reduce the tenacious advantage that life has over death" (*The Solitude*. Web.).

References:

Aghaei, Mohammad B. "Scope of Contexts, Characters and Events of Latin America in Marquez's Novels." *Studies in Literature and Language* 7.2 (2013): 8-14. Print.

Bailey, Norman A. "La Violencia in Colombia." *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 9.4 (1967): 561-575. Print.

Halka, Chester S. "One Hundred Years of Solitude in History, Politics, and Civilization Courses." *Approaches to Teaching Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Eds. Maria E.D. Valdes and Mario J. Valdes. New Delhi: East-West Press Pvt. Ltd., 2012. Print.

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. "Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America." Stockholm, Sweden. 8 Dec. 1982. Lecture. Web. 28 July. 2019. <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez_lecture.html>

.... *No One Writes to the Colonel*. Trans. J.S. Bernstein. London: Penguin, 1974. Print.

Minta, Stephen. *Garcia Marquez: Writer of Colombia*. New York: Harper and Row, 1987. Print.

Mittal, Nupur. "Postcolonial Environments in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's works." *Localities* 4.1 (2014): 147-176. Print.

Muzamil, Gazi Tareq. "Traumatic Imagination in the novel *No One Writes to the Colonel* by Garcia Marquez." *Journal of English and Literature (JEL)* 7.1 (2017): 5-10. Print.

Thankachy, Athulya VR. "The Impact of La Violencia in the Life of the Colonel in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel*." *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* 6.5 (2018): 32-33. Print