



One Hundred Years of Solitude-The Story of Mankind Re-visited

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Abstract— *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a novel by Columbian writer Gabriel Garcia Márquez mirrors the world we live in, it is the story of mankind retold. The novel is set in the imaginary community of Macondo, a village on the Columbian coast, and follows the lives of several generations of the Buendia family. Chief among these characters is Colonel Aureliano Buendia, perpetrator of thirty- two rebellions and father of seventeen illegitimate sons, and Úrsula Buendia, the clan's matriarch and witness to its eventual decline. Besides following the complicated relationships of the Buendia family, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* also reflects the political, social and economic troubles of South America. This paper highlights how the novel in the progression of an entire civilisation of Macondo in a span of one hundred years the hundred years symbolise the march of human civilisation from the beginning to the writer's assumed end. Further, the paper elucidates the meaning of solitude. The solitude has two connotations- firstly, it is a society studied in isolation, a society ridden with problems which are peculiar to it, a society in solitude because of the absence of communication links with the rest of the world. Secondly, it is also solitary because according to the writer every person during his lifetime suffers from his own solitude- a person's happiness, sorrow, madness, sickness are peculiar to him/her alone. The novel also significantly represents the politico-social and chronological development of a society.

Keywords— *solitude, civilisation, isolation, political consciousness, redundancy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

One Hundred Years of Solitude, a novel by Columbian writer Gabriel Garcia Márquez mirrors the world we live in, it is the story of mankind retold. The Greek philosopher Plato once said, "Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast, or a god", but the characters in this novel possess the attributes of none and yet they continue to have a solitary existence and this brings to the mind the lines of South African writer, Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) who wrote in *The Story of an African Farm* (1884):

She thought of the narrowness of the limits within which a human soul may speak and be understood by its nearest of mental kin, of how soon it reaches that solitary land of the individual experience in which no fellow footfall is ever heard.

The novel is set in the imaginary community of Macondo, a village on the Columbian coast, and follows the lives of several generations of the Buendia family. Chief among these characters is Colonel Aureliano Buendia, perpetrator of thirty- two rebellions and father of seventeen illegitimate sons, and Úrsula Buendia, the clan's matriarch and witness to its eventual decline. Besides following the complicated relationships of the Buendia family, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* also reflects the political, social and economic troubles of South America. Many critics have found the novel, with its complex family relationships and extraordinary events, to be a microcosm of Latin America itself.

II. THE SYMBOLIC CIVILISATIONAL PROGRESS OF MACONDO

The novel is a progression of an entire civilisation of Macondo in a span of one hundred years. These hundred years symbolise the march of human civilisation from the beginning to the writer's assumed end. The solitude has two connotations- firstly, it is a society studied in isolation, a society ridden with problems which are peculiar to it, a society in solitude because of the absence of communication links with the rest of the world. Secondly, it is also solitary because according to the writer every person during his lifetime suffers from his own solitude- a person's happiness, sorrow, madness, sickness are peculiar to him/her alone. The novel significantly represents the politico-social and chronological development of a society. It unfolds how a group of families bound by the relationship of kinship and common customs survives through the community life, leadership, papacy, politics, democracy, elections, rise of political consciousness, technological changes, growth of institutions and ultimately the whole process carries within itself the seeds of decay and also regeneration. At each of these stages, the redundancy of the stage is also brought to light.

The novel begins with the settling of families in the swamp of Macondo with the male member (José Arcadio Buendía) of the family as the head and all other members respecting him. This community follows a Socialistic pattern- the people work and enjoy the fruit of their sweat, even the houses are built on the same plan:

... José Arcadio Buendía had been a kind of youthful patriarch who would give instruction for planting and advise for the raising of children and animals, and who collaborated with everyone, ... even in the physical work, for the welfare of the community.¹

further,

José Arcadio Buendía, who was the most enterprising man ever to be seen in the village, had set up the placement of the houses in such a way that from all of them one could reach the river and draw water with the same effort, and he had lined up the streets with such good sense that no house got more sun during the hot time of the day.²

Buendía has two sons Arcadio and Aureliano and their characteristics again show in a chronological manner, the

evolution of mankind- the elder son José Arcadio shows the impulse for growth and physical strength and lacks imagination. The second son Aureliano has fearless curiosity and this comparison between the two shows how man evolved from his reliance on physical strength to the day when his curiosity led him to discover and invent new things. From here Márquez proceeds to the rise of papacy/religion in the society (here Macondo). Father Nicanor Reyna in the novel says:

He was appalled at the hardness of the inhabitants of Macondo, who were prospering in the midst of scandal, subject to the natural world, without baptising their children or sanctifying their festivals.³

Thereafter Márquez satirises the church and questions its importance in man's life. He raises certain fundamental questions, for instance, what is more important- enjoying festivals or sanctifying them? Márquez is of the opinion that people can prosper even without religion. In fact, he upholds the natural law wherein two lovers like Rebeca and Pietro Crespi do not have to wait for the construction of the church to get married (it is sad to see that they end up never getting married- Pietro Crespi dies and Rebeca marries another man). In fact, the priest performs magical tricks like levitation to convince people to come forward in establishing the church. People who doubt these institutions like José Arcadio or those who question them are the ones who are already rendered incapacitated as depicted by the author through José Arcadio who is tied to the chestnut tree. Colonel Aureliano's seventeen sons who have a cross mark on their foreheads are hunted down and put to death. Márquez here highlights the fact that religion merely serves the purpose of making identification simpler. The so-called enemy is identified on the basis of religion and killed, something that keeps happening in multi-religious societies, a case in point is India where every now and then riots take place in the name of religion.

Further, Márquez pokes fun at elections that are held in a democratic set up to choose a government of the people, for the people and by the people. While corrupt politicians vie with each other for a berth in govt. offices, common people only face hardships and Márquez gives a humorous turn to this whole issue like the disarming of Macondo before the elections when even the kitchen knives of housewives are taken away, and also the imposition of martial law when even the farm implements of people are taken away. Márquez, like a deft craftsman juxtaposes the serious and the ludicrous. The people of Macondo also lack political consciousness, knowledge and cannot

¹ Gabriel Garcia Marquez. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Trans. Gregory Rabassa (London: Picador, 1978) 14.

² Marquez, *ibid* pp. 15.

³ Marquez, *ibid* pp. 73.

distinguish one political party from the other, here the Conservatives and the Liberals. This only points towards the gullibility of the people and how they become vulnerable to the exploitation at the hands of politicians.

Everything in the novel being highly symbolic even the two parties represent the two different mindsets of the people of under-developed and developing countries- Conservatism, whereby people are in favour of holding on to all that is traditional in society and want to conserve and preserve the existing institutions and customs and Liberalism, wherein people want to break away from all that is traditional and are on the lookout for change. Our attention is also drawn towards the rigging of polls in Macondo:

*There were almost as many red ballots as blue, but the sergeant left only ten red ones and made up the difference with blue ones.*⁴

This is also what is happening in the contemporary world rife with violence of all kinds, particularly at the time of elections, (Do people really get a govt. of their choice? This is what Márquez focusses at. The futility of war and what war makes of men is another aspect highlighted in the novel and Marquez's characters' realization of this futility is appalling. Colonel Aureliano Buendia says, "I've come to realise only just now that I'm fighting because of pride."⁵

While talking to General José Raquel Moncada who has been sentenced to death Colonel Aureliano says, "Remember, old friend ...I'm not shooting you. It's the revolution that's shooting you."⁶ Further ahead he says:

*You know better than I ...that all courts- martials are farces and that you're really paying for the crimes of other people, because this time we're going to win the war at any price. Wouldn't you have done the same in my place?*⁷

That war leads to desensitisation and loss of feelings like pity can be seen when Colonel Aureliano sees his mother after a long time and,

...he discovered the scratches, the welts, the sores, the ulcers and the scars that had been left on her by more than half a century of daily life, and he saw that those damages did not even arouse a feeling of pity in him. Then he made one last effort to search in his heart for the place where his affection had rotted away and he could not find it. On another occasion, he felt at least a

*confused sense of shame when he found the smell of Úrsula on his own skin, and more than once he felt her thoughts interfering with his. But all of that had been wiped out by the war.*⁸

The yellow train of capitalism, industrialisation and technological advancement fails to bring prosperity to Macondo and on the contrary leads to banana company strike and massacre of workers. Talking of labour unrest Márquez writes:

*They burned plantations and commissaries, tore up tracks to impede the passage of the trains that began to open their path with machine- gun fire, and they cut telegraph and telephone wires. The irrigation ditches were stained with blood.*⁹

No one believes José Arcadio Segundo who is a witness to the massacre of the workers. People turn a deaf ear to his "version of the massacre or the nightmare trip of the train loaded with corpses travelling towards the sea either." All efforts are made to hide the reality of the situation and instead the officers insist,

*You must have been dreaming...Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, nothing ever will happen. This is a happy town.*¹⁰

and again,

*By a decision of the court it was established and set down in solemn decrees that the workers did not exist.*¹¹

In this way Márquez shows us how the reality is distorted and presented to suit the interests of the powerful, the ruling class. He tries to bring home the point that development will fail to bear fruits if it is not in perfect harmony with the hopes and aspirations of the common people.

Márquez has given a true picture of how development proceeds in the under-developed world. The metal ingots ("which so amazed the Macondians by attracting iron articles"), the magnifying glass and the telescope which have been known to the world since ages enamour the people, they also find the sight of ice quite intriguing and all this only highlights the backwardness of Latin American and other under-developed economies. Similarly, José Arcadio Segundo managed with great effort to classify the cryptic letters of the parchments in the laboratory and his brother Aureliano Segundo remembered having seen the same letters in the English encyclopaedias,

⁴ Marquez, *ibid* pp. 85.

⁵ Marquez, *ibid* pp. 116.

⁶ Marquez, *ibid* pp. 134.

⁷ Marquez, *ibid* pp. 135.

⁸ Marquez, *ibid* pp. 145.

⁹ Marquez, *ibid* pp. 247.

¹⁰ Marquez, *ibid* pp. 252.

¹¹ Marquez, *ibid* pp. 246.

thus realising that what Arcadio has wasted his energies on was rediscovering the 'English alphabet'. Also, what Aureliano Babilonia spent his time deciphering with great effort on the parchments was the language Sanskrit- a language already known to the world (or atleast to the East) for over two thousand years. Are these fantastic discoveries that leave the people so enamoured really fantastic? It is only a wastage of energy and time of a civilization, keeping it in a state of perpetual backwardness and this calls for a need to have closer knitting together of the world, towards globalisation, towards the emergence of world as a global village where what has once been discovered is freely exchanged. There is a greater need for socialization rather than solitude of civilizations.

Úrsula shuddering "with the evidence that the time was not passing, as she had just admitted, but that it was turning in a circle", highlights the vicious circles that the economies of the developing countries are caught up in. Doing the same things, following the same pattern in each generation, committing the same mistakes, the writer feel will lead these economies nowhere. These nations need to break these circles and come out of them which is possible only if they apply efforts above a certain threshold level, to break the inertia as has been very aptly given by economist Leibenstein's theory of Critical Minimum Effort- giving up piecemeal efforts and applying concerted efforts. Till people are caught up in these vicious circles there is no scope for peace and happiness.

The novel also deals with a deep dissatisfaction and frustration with life which is a contemporary issue. The times we are living in are those of anxiety and depression which will go on plaguing the society and the writer has touched these issues very sensitively in the novel. Colonel Aureliano indulges in making and re-making goldfish, here he represents the mechanical man of our times who is a mere cog in the machine. The machine- like existence leaves no time to ponder over the troubled past or worrisome future, it is mere existence and not living- it lacks enthusiasm, it lacks zest. This occupying oneself with repetitive activities also serves as an escape mechanism.

Weaving of her own shroud by Amaranta is symbolic of how people start making preparations for death and lose all interest in life, life ceases to hold any charm for them. People have no respite in their lives and their guilts and complexes haunt them wherever they go. The black bandage that Amaranta always wears on her hand (bandage of black gauze) until her death represents the guilty conscience of humans (she had refused to marry Pietro Crespi who had then committed suicide by slitting his wrists).

The discovery of widowed Rebeca after fifty long years shows the apathy of the public and how easily its miserable, ill-fated members are obliterated from the memory and also how the living are considered dead. What could be a better instance of this indifference of society, than the case of famous Indian actress of yesteryears Pravin Babi who dominated Bollywood during her heydays. She had completely faded out of the memory of the people, no one enquired about her till one fine day she was discovered dead in her apartment.

It is not only the living who are unhappy, in this world there is no peace for even the dead. Melquiades and Prudencio Aguilar keep coming back after death. Had they been at peace they would not have risen from their graves. There is not only a complete dissatisfaction with life but also with death. In coming back time and again Melquiades also represents the spirit of scientific enquiry (spirit- since he comes back time and again after death). This is the spirit that propels humans to go on with their research work shut up in laboratories.

Innocent is Ignorant and Ignorance is Bliss. And in such times as we live in only the innocent ones like Remedios the Beauty "bearing no cross on their back" have a hope of escaping, rising above their corrupting environment (as depicted by her levitation).

The major female protagonist of the novel, Úrsula, the matriarch represents the wisdom of the society, of the aged. She is watchful and alert and keeps advising everyone till she is dead on never letting a Buendia marry a person of the same blood and of ways to keep the red ants from bringing the house down. Red ants are symbolic of the forces of netherworld that lead to the ultimate decay and degeneration (the dark forces of *Pataal*, netherworld). These are the forces against which the intense toil of a laborious woman like Santa Sofia de la Piedad also fails and she is forced to give up trying to halt the onset of decay.

The appearance of the atavistic character of a tail in humans signifies not only the evolution of man from animal but also the re-surfacing of the animal instincts in man and the bitter truth that these very carnal/animal instincts will ultimately lead to the end of civilisation.

III. CONCLUSION

The writer feels that the Apocalypse is pre-determined (encoded on parchments). He believes that the end of human civilisation will inevitably result from the frailties in human character itself (e.g. incest, lust). The novel has a powerful Biblical imagery, proceeding from the Genesis moving on to the Deluge (incessant rainfall over a long

period of time) and finally the Apocalypse. That the end is known, though encoded, also that it is written in Sanskrit- the language of the Gods themselves- depicts that the wisdom of the East will also not be able to thwart the onset of the end.

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