

No one writes to the Colonel: A study through a Postcolonial lens

Mariyam Ilyas Siddiqui

Research Scholar, Department of English
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

Abstract

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Novel No One Writes to the Colonel is an autobiographical novel which was published in the year 1961 and was later translated into English language. The work of literature appears to be close to the writer so much so that the author considers this to be his finest work. In the research paper I have tried to highlight the postcolonial features in the stated work. The features include the technique used by the author, the references taken from the history, the symbolism used and above all the impact of colonisers on the mentioned colony.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Historical, Autobiographical, Novella

Research Paper

Novel No One Writes to the Colonel was written between 1956 and 1957 while Gabriel Garcia Marquez was living in Paris in Hotel des Trois Colleges. It was first published in Spanish language in the year 1961 while its first English translated version came out on September 1, 1968. Initially its publication was declined by many publishers but later a friend of Marquez agreed to do the same. Due to its short length it is considered a novella and Marquez even name the collection of his Short stories after this. It is believed that Marquez considered this to be his best work and even went to an extent of saying that he wrote his Nobel winning novel One Hundred Years of Solitude so that people would read No One Writes to the Colonel. The novel also holds a very high esteem in the hands of critics. This clearly highlights the importance of this particular novel in Marquez's life and shows the personal connection of the text with author's life. There are many different theories behind this book most of them ultimately amount to the personal connection Marquez had with the book. It is believed that the central character of the novel is an inspiration Marquez took from his grandfather who was also a Colonel who fought as a combatant from the Liberal party and just like the central character he too never received his pension which was promised to him 18 years earlier. It is also believed that since Marquez was very much attached to his grandfather hence he based his central character on him. Another interesting theory with regard to this novel is related to the time period during which it was written. The novel was written between the period of 1956 and 1957, it is the same time period during which Marquez was unemployed and hence is believed to take inspirations from the daily lives that he had witnessed during the same phase. It was the post war era when Marquez was trying to create a story about human emotions and the loss of hope. He was coming out of the shadow of Faulkner and was writing something about the usual and unusual human conditions.

The novel is based in the town of Columbia during one of the most important era that Colombia has ever faced i.e. during a civil war. It is known as La Violencia in Spanish. The period ranges from 1948 -58. It took place between the paramilitary forces of the Conservatives and the Liberals. The history of Civil War says that it broke when one of the popular politicians who were also a presidential candidate from a Liberal Party was murdered. The war started with Bogotazo riots which killed around 5000 people. It was also the time when Catholicism was a major religion which was followed and it was said that the church authorities supported the Conservatives. Thus a lot was said about how the several priests directly orders the murder of the opposition during Catholic masses. Although no official statements were made from the Board of Bishops but they were accused of this unproven act. It was later mentioned in a 1950 book *Lo que el cielo no perdona* ("What heaven doesn't forgive") which was written by the secretary to Builes, Father Fidel Blandon. As a result of this he went into disguised to save himself from prosecution which he eventually had to face once he was identified. Looking at the history of Columbia it is easy to figure out that violence is ubiquitous in Columbia. According to Ganzalo Sanchez, a former Bolivian president,

“There is hardly a single social sphere, geographical location, or group that has not been affected by violence. Be it in the cities or remote rural areas, the social microsphere of the family or the macro sphere of politics, the lower, middle, or upper class, the judiciary or any business sector, violence is everywhere”.

Moreover it was also the time of the military rule of General Rojas Pinilla, a period from 1953 to 1957 when the civil liberties of the Columbian citizens were curtailed and the censorship of the press was established.

In Columbia the two political parties which were creating chaos were Columbia Conservative Party and Columbia Liberal Party. Both of these were responsible for the estimated lives of 200,000 people which were lost during the period, a figure which amounts to 2.79% of the total population which was aged 15 years or older. The culture of violence in Columbia is rooted to the Spanish Colonial rule and has existed since then. With Conservatives coming into power after the election of 1946 the condition worsens. The atrocities committed by both the parties were horrific. Regina Janes quotes an anonymous witness who thus describes the actions of the Conservative authorities:

“My eyes have seen many sights. I have seen men coming into the cities mutilated, women raped, children flogged and wounded. I saw a man whose tongue had been cut out and people who were lashed to a tree and made to witness the cruel scene told me that the policemen yelled, as they cut out his tongue: —You won’t be giving any more cheers for the Liberal Party, you bastard. They cut the genitals off other men so that they wouldn’t procreate any more Liberals. Others had their legs and arms cut off and were made to walk about, bleeding, on the stumps of their limbs. And I know of men who were held bound while policemen and Conservative civilians took it in turns to rape their wives and daughters. Everything was carried out according to a preconceived plan of extermination. And the victims of these bloodthirsty policemen were poor, humble country people who were members of the Liberal Party. Their wives, their old folk and their children were shot in the full light of the day. The official police took possession of the property of Liberal farmers, killed the owners,

requisitioned their barns and disposed of their money, their livestock; in a word, of all that had been the livelihood of their families. At times these atrocious crimes were committed under the cover of night, with the encouragement of high government officials. And all this in the false name of God, with holy medals jingling around their necks and without remorse". (43)

So the novel set during this horrific time period of the Columbian history revolves around a retired Colonel whose name has not been mentioned in the entire novel. The novel is set during a specific time and space but it does seem to cut across time and space in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin. The unnamed central character leads to the feeling of how insignificant an individual living in Columbia is. The novel is not set in the mythical town of Macondo, in fact it is set in an unnamed small town which is typified as 'el pueblo'. The description of this small village with river, almond trees, shops owned by Syrian merchants depicts that it can be any forgotten town in the North eastern region of Colombia. The town isn't Macondo but it shares some features with the mythical village such as the humidity which is very suffocating, the penetrating heat, never ending rains and the flora and fauna. Just like Macondo the only connection with the outside world is through river. Every Friday, the boats arrive with the awaited mails and that's how they connect to the outside world. No particular geographical description of the town has been given. The travellers who travel are said to take 8 long hours to reach the town, but from where and any close by town is not been named. By the vague description and the fact that Marquez have some personal context to the book responds to the fact that it might correspond to a town named Sucre where Marquez has done his schooling and eventually has met his wife there. The text itself is even less than 100 pages in length and follows the life of colonel for 3 months. It is a deep study of the human psyche in an absurd and unjust world. Despite of the political context of the Columbia history, Marquez has not shown any political violence in detail. In fact it is just felt as an oppressive element of the life of the people living in the town. The Colonel is a veteran of thousand day's war who lives under Martial Law. The character of colonel is like an everlasting and moving symbol of the human conditions of the people of Columbia. The novel begins with

"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." (1)

Clearly indicating the condition of the colonel in which he is living. Poverty haunts his daily life. Colonel, who is an ageing war hero hasn't received his pension which was promised to him 18 years before and hence living a financially unstable life. The story does not take place in Macondo, the mythical village. It takes place in an unnamed small town, represented as "el pueblo", the village. The main features of the village are the river, the dusty plaza, the almond trees, and the labyrinth of shops owned by Syrian merchants, known in the village as the Turks, the curlews, the church, and the cockpit. It draws similarities between any forgotten town in the north eastern region of Colombia. The text represents the relationships between the present and the past as well as Colonel's personal history and the collective history of the town. Colonel and his asthmatic wife are struggling with poverty and the political oppressions of the town. Moving further we got to know that Colonel's only son,

Agustin died due to political reasons. As one reads further it becomes even more evident the corruption is going on by local as well as by national officials.

Apparently the novel was written during the Suez Canal Crisis when Marquez himself was struggling with life as he had recently lost his job in the newspaper in Paris. During that time Marquez was living with a Spanish actor Tachia. Therefore, the hard times of Gabo can be found similar to that of colonel and his wife and the plot is believed to be originated in the same period of deprivation. It is also indicated that every Friday the Colonel waits for the letter from the officials but unfortunately it's always "another Friday without a letter". Though the past of the Colonel is not bitter but the novel definitely shows the stark contrast of the present day scenario. The frustrations of the present are contrasted against the joyous past when his son was alive. The rooster present in the scene is a symbol of positivity and hope for colonel as it is the only memory of their son left with them even though colonel and his wife were trying to sell the rooster at the best price possible but they were very hopeful from the cockpit fanatics who might pay the right amount. Moreover, most of which Colonel remembers is related to the town's political history. Marquez here give the description of the politicians as "scrupulously groomed" is in clear contrast to the corrupt Mayor who appears in his balcony unshaven and is seen wearing pyjamas.

When they pass the Mayor's house with a coffin, he said, "Where are they going with that dead man" with authoritative manner and ordered to change the direction. They change the passage and go through the poor areas. A second reference to the country's lost democracy is the colonel's recollection of the "tumultuous Electoral Sunday Crowd" with their anticipation of the "Circus unloading" fore-shadowing of the absurd government under which they now live. At the post-office Colonel says to doctor that "There is no hope of elections" (12)

Apart from Mayor there is one more character names Don Sabas who is very cunning and leads a very prosperous and a good life by cheating the innocent and vulnerable people. He has a very good rapport with Mayor and he pretends himself to be a true patriot. In addition to that he was Augustin's Godfather but is a total contrast to the Colonel. He is a very corrupt businessmen and has earned money through illegal means and everyone knows that but none of the people wanted to say something about it because everyone believes that this will only create more trouble and political repression for them keeping in mind the contacts that Don Sabas had. He didn't even spare the Colonel. He knows that rooster is the only memory of Augustin left with his parents even then he tempted colonel to earn a good amount of money by selling the precious rooster. Initially he asked Colonel to sell the rooster at a price money of nine hundred pesos and when the colonel and his wife decides to sell it to Sabas he became indifferent to what he said earlier and offered only four hundred pesos to the old couple. The old poverty ridden couple gets exploited at the hands of a corrupt businessman who is in good terms with the governing officials, a typical La Violencia situation which prevails for ten long years in Columbia. Latin American history is revealed through the combination of realist detail, narrative flashbacks and rich symbolism and it reminds us of distant but determinant past of Columbia. The doctor's words clearly explain the evil nature of people like Sabas during La Violencia:

"The only animal who feeds on human flesh is Sabas, the doctor said. I'm sure he'd resell the rooster for the nine hundred pesos" (55)

The rooster is also there which shows the positivity and hope for colonel. History is the very important in post-colonial writings and Garcia Marquez has used this aspect to write history for retelling the truth as in the second half of 20th century most of the writers did. Waiting also becomes one of the chief characteristics of the human existence of those time as clearly depicted by Marquez through the character of colonel and through time characters experiment the flow of time. He writes, "For nearly sixty years-since the end of the last civil war, the Colonel had done nothing but wait. October was one of the few things which arrived."(6) Bureaucracy proves to be the insurmountable obstacle for the recognition of the Colonel's right to a pension. He tries to look for solutions by changing the lawyer in charge of his case. But hopes are scarce, as the lawyer points out. The scene between the lawyer and the Colonel reminds us of Kafka. He tries to trace the proof of claim and the lawyer says that would be impossible.

" The Colonel became alarmed. As treasurer of the revolution in the district of Macondo, he had undertaken a difficult six-day journey with the funds of the civil war in two trunks roped to the back of a mule. He arrived at the camp of Neerlandia dragging the mule, which was dead from hunger, half an hour before the treaty was signed. Colonel Aureliano Buendia-quarter master general of the revolutionary forces

on the Atlantic coast-held the receipt for the funds, and included the two trunks in his inventory of the surrender.

'Those documents have an incalculable value' the Colonel said 'I agree', said the lawyer. 'But those documents have passed through thousands and thousands of hands, in thousands and thousands of offices, before they reached God knows which department in the War Ministry.'

'No official could fail to notice documents like those', the Colonel said.

'But the officials have changed many times in the last fifteen years', the lawyer pointed out.' Just think about it; there have been seven Presidents, and each President changed his cabinet at least ten times, and each minister changed his staff at least a hundred times...' (28)

After this discouraging episode with the lawyer, the Colonel decides to assume the case personally and writes a petition to the capital.

Gerald Martin describes the last paragraph as "one of the most perfect in literature. The exhausted old man has managed to fall asleep but his exasperated wife, almost beside herself, shakes him violently and wakes him up. She wants to know what they will live on now that he has finally decided not to sell the fighting rooster but to prepare him for combat:

'What will we eat?'

The Colonel had taken seventy five years –the seventy five years of his life, minute by minute-to arrive at that instant. He felt pure, explicit, invincible, at the moment .He replied:

'Shit.'(NWC69)

“To live is to wait, always wishing, waiting. Only the future has a substance. Tomorrow is the only road.” This is how Miguel de Unamuno, the famous Spanish philosopher, author of the essay “The tragic sentiment of Life”, defined existence as a flow which is transmitted through expectations and painful hopes.

Gerald Martin, in his biography of Garcia Marquez also points out that this masterpiece of short fiction, “is almost perfect in its self-contained intensity, it’s perfectly punctuated plot and its brilliantly prepared conclusion.” The novel can be studied as a universal story of a good man facing a misfortune. It also depicts the Latin American history with a combination of details which are realistic, the narrative flashbacks and the beautiful usage of symbolism. Thus the study of novel through the lens of post-colonialism is very apt as it highlights the usage of counter political writing of the text which Marquez has beautifully depicted through the anecdotes of his personal life. Marquez seems to believe in the very fact that fiction is apparently the best way to retell history in the most interesting way.

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