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One Hundred Years of Solitude: A Classic Case of Historiographic Metafiction

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Abstract

Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* charts the troubled history of Latin America. In Colombia the Thousand Days' War claimed over one lakh lives and the number of deaths in the Banana Strike massacre of 1928 is not clearly known. By taking recourse to magical realism, García Márquez foregrounds the plurality of history and destabilizes the official versions of these events. He seeks to rewrite an alternate history and reconstruct the past in an artistic manner. The research paper shall analyze how he undermines the idea of objective reality and absolute truth. His narrative technique enables him to challenge the truth-claims of history and debunk the dominant ideology prevalent in the state. By incorporating historical events in fiction, he is able to re-tell the transitional phases in national history, comment on them and pass his own interpretation. The novel, therefore, is a classic example of historiographic metafiction. It is popular, self-reflexive and incorporates historical events and personages. A genre like this, interrogates the notion that the past can be truthfully or objectively portrayed. It also critiques the idea that the past which is an amorphous and chaotic mess could be represented in a narrative which is innocent or impartial. Thus, the very idea of history with definite borders is questioned. It is no longer considered immutable, natural or unbiased. Hence, history is seen as a human construct, nothing less than a discourse.
Keywords: Latin America, Thousand Days' War, Banana Strike massacre, historiographic metafiction., magical realism.

Latin American history is fraught with violence and war. It has been a constant locale of innumerable civil wars, ruthless dictatorships and coups d'etat. The continent in general and Colombia in particular has witnessed gory bloodshed and lawlessness. These brutalities are portrayed by Gabriel García Márquez in his celebrated novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This widely acclaimed novel charts the history of seven generations of the Buendía family in an isolated place called Macondo. This place was founded by José Arcadio Buendía and his companions. Initially, Macondo consisted of twenty houses and the inhabitants lived in mutual harmony. Macondo was so raw and recent "that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point" (García Márquez 1).

However, things changed abruptly when José Arcadio Buendía's wife Úrsula Iguarán discovered a route that connected Macondo to the outer world. As soon as this happened, the government sent an authority to Macondo to look after the affairs of the village and control it. When the magistrate, Don Apolinar Moscote arrived in Macondo, his first order was to paint all houses blue and when he was confronted and

his order was not obliged, he threatened José Arcadio Buendía by saying: "I must warn you that I'm armed" (58). This sowed the seeds of rebellion against the authorities in the minds of the inhabitants. Then the region was plagued by endless civil wars in which the liberals and the conservatives fought to gain power. A railroad was brought to Macondo and a banana company was set up. The company exploited the local workers which forced them to go on a mass strike. The banana company was unwilling to fulfill the demands of the workers and the workers on the other hand did not yield to the company's dictates which led to a massacre. The government announced that the massacre did not take place at all. Eventually, Macondo was swept away by a hurricane.

In a very broad sense, the novel is an evocation of humankind's earliest settlements, its fruition and its ultimate apocalypse. The novel has a biblical appeal so much so that it has often been dubbed as a Latin American 'Bible'. The research paper however, aims to discuss *One Hundred Years* in the light of history and as an exemplar of historiographic metafiction, that is to say that the novel is conscious of "its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs … [and this] is made the grounds for its rethinking of the form and contents of the past" (Hutcheon 5).

The paper foregrounds the idea that *One Hundred Years* is a rewriting of Latin American history in general and the Colombian history in particular. As Stephen Minta affirms: "He [García Márquez] is … inevitably concerned with the whole history of his country and continent, and … he has constantly laid stress on the importance of developing alternative sources of history as a challenge to the status of conventional ones" (30). The novel questions the very basis of historiography and attempts to look at the past from multiple standpoints and perspectives. García Márquez makes ample use of historical data. He fictionalizes past events such as A Thousand Days' War, Treaty of Neerlandia, and the Banana Massacre. The civil war described in the novel is a direct reference to the Thousand Days' War of Colombia which spanned from 1899-1902.

The war between the liberals and the conservatives was a direct consequence of the fraudulent elections in which the conservatives were accused of maintaining power by resorting to unfair means. This is also a historical actuality which took place in Colombia in the elections of 1899. García Márquez describes the event with vivid details of the chaotic political situation, the futility of war and the accompanying violence. In the novel, Colonel Aureliano Buendía joins the liberal party when he witnesses the blatant misuse of power by Don Apolinar Moscote in the elections. He becomes the leader of the liberals. As the war stretches Colonel Aureliano Buendía questions the very idea of war. Later in the novel he is seen contemplating the differences between the liberals and conservatives. He says: "The only difference today between the Liberals and Conservatives is that the Liberals go to mass at five o'clock and the Conservatives at eight" (García Márquez 248). He also realizes that he was "fighting because of pride" (139). The twenty years' civil war was finally put to an end with the Treaty of Neerlandia which was signed by Colonel Aureliano Buendía who is the central character in the novel and around whom much of the action revolves. Critics claim that he is a fictionalized version of General Rafael Uribe Uribe, who like Colonel Aureliano Buendía had participated in thirty-two armed uprisings and lost all of them.

The novel challenges the notion of linear history, though the story of the Buendía family seems to be narrated in a chronological manner but basically the narrative takes long leaps in the future and simultaneously reminisces the past and therefore moves back and forth in time. García Márquez craftily incorporates repetitions and flashbacks. Phrases such as 'many years later' and 'years later' or the same

names of characters illustrate this technique. The novel sheds light on the absurdity of war and the adverse effects of science. The arrival of railroad, electricity, cars and other modern techniques facilitated the arrival of the banana company and thereby accelerated Macondo's destruction. The banana company established a plantation in Macondo and savagely repressed the workers. The agitated workers protested against the "… lack of sanitary facilities in their living quarters, the nonexistence of medical services, and terrible working conditions" (305). They even alleged that "they were not being paid in real money but in scrip, which was good only to buy Virginia ham in the company commissaries" (305-306). The company quelled the protestors by firing indiscriminately on men, women and children alike.

García Márquez borrowed this event directly from history. This event took place in Colombia in 1928 in the town of Ciénaga when the workers of the banana plantation urged the United Fruit Company of America to address their demands. This event was censored in history books and García Márquez's treatment of this event "has been hailed as one of the finest examples of literature recreating history" (Darraj 14). It is described along with the historical personages associated with it. For example, General Carlos Cortes Vargas who was sent by the government to look into the matter and end the strike is duly mentioned in the novel as well. It is important to note that this event is interpreted in diverse ways in the novel as in history. José Arcadio Segundo witnesses the massacre along with another union leader called Colonel Gavilán. One interpretation of the event is articulated by José Arcadio Segundo and the other is given by the government. The government announced that "there were no dead, the satisfied workers had gone back to their families" (García Márquez 315). This version is "repeated a thousand times and mangled out all over the country by every means of communication the government found at hand" (315). José Arcadio Segundo on the other hand gave a harrowing account of thousands of people being machine gunned. Furthermore, he found himself "lying against dead people," (312) who were being carried in a train to be dumped into the sea. When he regained consciousness after this frightful event, he recounted the number of dead in the massacre and said: "There must have been three thousand of them" (313). Immediately afterwards, he stated, "It must have been all the people who were at the station" (313). Then he said, "There were more than three thousand of them" (319). He further reiterated, "I'm sure now that they were everybody who had been at the station" (319). Then, surprisingly, he gave a precise number of dead people: "Three thousand four hundred eight" (342).

This innate inability to relate the 'past as it really was' suggests that truth is provisional and no narrative is impersonal or objective. As Hayden White suggests, its our narrativization of the past that lends order and meaning to the chaotic and incoherent mess of events (White 27). Clearly, then, this meaning-granting exercise can in no way be innocent as it privileges one kind of knowledge and marginalizes the other. The novel foregrounds the act of representation and asks the readers to question long-held assumptions regarding true historical representation of events. Although, there is no denying the fact that the past that once existed is accessible to the contemporary world only in the textualised version such as books, documents, archives and eye-witness accounts, however, Dominick LaCapra is also right in his assertion that these documents may have "critical or even potentially transformative relations to phenomena represented in them" (38). Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: *History, Theory, Fiction* expounds that historiographic metafiction "effects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge" (89). However, what is noteworthy about this genre is its foregrounding of epistemological problems related to fiction and history. Hutcheon maintains that these past events are not inherently meaningful but rather meaning is infused into them:

> What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ("exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination"). In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past 'events' into present historical 'facts'. This is not a 'dishonest refuge from truth' but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs. (89)

As José Arcadio Segundo narrated his experiences to other people, the only person who believed him was Aureliano, everybody else endorsed the official version of the event. Everybody believed that, "Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will happen. This is a happy town" (García Márquez 316). A woman even countered him by saying that, "There haven't been any dead here" (313-314). Other than José Arcadio Segundo, Colonel Lorenzo Gavilán also witnessed the massacre. Earlier, they were also sent to jail together. García Márquez deftly alludes to Carlos Fuentes through the character of Colonel Gavilán, a comrade of Artemio Cruz. With this intertexual reference he brings home the idea that both history proper and fiction are human constructs and literary artifacts. Apart from research and observation, García Márquez heavily relies on memory, childhood stories about wars and violence, supernatural events, myths and legends that his grandparents passed on to him. He employs the technique of magical realism to register his protest against the authoritarian regimes for the horrid brutalities they commit with total impunity. This is better explained by the author himself in his Nobel Lecture "The Solitude of Latin America" where he asserts that the recourse to magical realism is sought because of 'its ability to convey the unearthly tidings of Latin America'(qtd. in Bowers 39). Pertinently then, *One Hundred Years* is an indictment of official history and can also be read as an alternate history from the point of view of repressed and subjugated people, a history of people who were silenced, forgotten and unloved. Philip Swanson observes that García Márquez's technique of magical realism:

> must be a political question of reinterpretation of reality. Utilising the oral style inherited from his grandmother's fantastic story-telling, García Márquez seems to want to reproduce a traditional, popular rural perspective − challenging the hegemony of the alien, dominant, imported culture and reinstating the value of the community's own cultural perspective. (12)

> Being a world class storyteller, García Márquez believes in pluralistic history that undermines the whole project of history as an absolute, immutable and impersonal account. Magical realism allows him to recreate the transitional moments in history, comment on them and pass on his own interpretation. This technique allows him to question the truth-claims of history and destabilize the dominant ideology prevalent in the state. *One Hundred Years* "reveals the haphazard and fervent way in which people choose their political allegiances without regard for the political debates, which leads to disastrous and violent consequences" (Bowers 42). It can be argued that the cases of political violence in the novel are drawn from 'la violencia' (1948-58), a period in which state terrorism reached a new extreme. Furthermore, the novel interrogates the notion of objective reality and absolute truth. This is exemplified when years later Aureliano mentions the event of banana massacre and no one believes him. He realizes that people

"repudiate the myth of the workers hemmed in at the station and the train with two hundred car loaded with dead people, and they would even insist that, after all, everything had been set forth in judicial documents and in primary-school textbooks: the banana company had never existed" (García Márquez 396). Regarding the representation of banana massacre, García Márquez himself clarified that his narrative is not totally true to facts. He remarks:

… The banana events […] are perhaps my earliest memory. They were so legendary that when I wrote *One Hundred Years of Solitude* I wanted to know the real facts and the true number of deaths. There was a talk of a massacre, an apocalyptic massacre. Nothing is sure, but there can't have been many deaths. But even three or five deaths in those circumstances at that time … would have been a catastrophe. It was a problem for me ... when I discovered it wasn't a spectacular slaughter. In a book where things are magnified like One Hundred Years of Solitude … I needed to fill a whole railway with corpses. I couldn't stick to historical reality. I couldn't say they were three, or seven, or 17 deaths. They wouldn't even fill a tiny wagon. So I decided on 3,000 dead because that filled the dimension of the book I was writing. The legend has now been adopted as history….(qtd. in Posada-Carbó 395-396)

This communicates the idea that the past that once existed cannot be known in its true essence or in its entirety, so one can easily infer that even if *One Hundred Years* is considered an alternate history, it is not a true account of the historical events. There is only a certain degree of truth manifest in the novel and therefore, it does not aim to replace official history in any way. Michael Wood is of the opinion that "The texture of the novel is made up of legends treated as truths−because they are truths to those who believe them−but also (as we have seen) of real facts that no one believes in" (58). The novel, maintains a constant tension between the truths and lies that have passed on in history. Thus, one can say that no narrrative is neutral, and that subjectivity inevitably seeps in all the narratives. García Márquez's deliberate distortion of history underscores the textuality of history and the inherent limitations of knowing the past in its totality. This distortion is done "to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error" (Hutcheon 114).

The constructedness of history is further highlighted in the novel with the help of Melquíades mysterious parchments. Though the reader is made aware of them quite early in the novel but it is only at the end the parchments make sense to both the reader and to Aureliano who is the only character in the novel who is able to decipher Melquíades secret codes. The parchments revealed the story of the Buendías "down to the most trivial details" (García Márquez 421). These manuscripts written by Melquíades flout the conventional time scheme. The notion of supposedly continuous and chronological history is undermined and the metafictional element of the novel is underscored. Melquíades "had concentrated a century of daily episodes in such a way that they coexisted in one instant" (421). When Aureliano saw his son being carried away by ants, he perfectly understood the epigraph of the parchments that said: "*The first of the line is tied to a tree and the last is being eaten by the ants*" (420 emphasis in original). At that very moment he realized that he was reading his own history and in order to know his future he shuts himself in a room to decode the parchments fully. This experience was so strange that it seemed as if he was looking into a speaking mirror. He soon came to a conclusion that he would never be able to leave the room and by that time the wind had already started blowing which would soon

turn into a 'biblical hurricane' to sweep Macondo. This self-reflexive element in the novel makes the reader question if the novel and Melquíades parchments are basically one. The novel, thus, draws attention to its own status as a literary artifact.

One important feature of *One Hundred Years* is that it gives ample space to women, as opposed to traditional historiography in which women are deliberately obliterated. The women in the novel are presented as equal counterparts in every aspect and manner of life. They are depicted as headstrong and completely capable of taking decisions. Úrsula, the matriarch is portrayed to be politically, socially and culturally conscious. Despite José Arcadio Buendía's persistent efforts to join Macondo to the outer world, it is she who triumphs in this endeavour. In the course of the novel, Colonel Aureliano Buendía authorizes his nephew, Arcadio to take charge of the town while he is away fighting the civil war. Arcadio, however, grows into a tyrannical ruler and when Úrsula learns this, she starts "Whipping him without mercy, she chased him to the back of the courtyard, where Arcadio curled up like a snail in its shell" (108). Then she takes power in her own hands and rules the town. She is painted as a woman of firm and resolute will. Once she counsels her son, Colonel Aureliano Buendía, against killing Colonel Gerineldo Márquez. She cautions him in these strict words:

'I know that you're going to shoot Gerineldo,' … 'and that I can't do anything to stop it. But I give you one warning: as soon as I see his body I swear to you by the bones of my father and mother, by the memory of José Arcadio Buendía, I swear to you before God that I will drag you out from wherever you're hiding and kill you with my own two hands.' (173)

Úrsula lived for around two hundred years and is shown to be an anchor of the Buendía family. She is projected as a woman of substance who breaks away from the stereotypical image of women confined to their household affairs. In her last years, she turned blind but she didn't let anyone know, nor did anyone notice because she meticulously trained herself to recognize all the voices and perceive all the things around her. It is noteworthy to mention that soon after her death, the Buendía clan started to lose ground and collapsed altogether.

Another important subject matter of the novel is the meaninglessness of violence. The novel is well stocked with instances of violence that are representative of the turbulent and anarchic history. The very first line of the novel is suggestive of the ensuing violence. The gravity of the situation and the grim atmosphere is echoed in Úrsula's words when she says to Aureliano José: "Don't go out into the street after six o'clock" (156). The reign of terror is clearly manifest when Colonel Magnífico Visbal is ruthlessly killed along with his seven-year-old grandson just because the little child accidently spilled his drink on a policeman's uniform and in turn:

The barbarian cut him to pieces with his machete, and with one stroke he cut off the head of the grandfather as he tried to stop him. The whole town saw the decapitated man pass by as a group of men carried him to his house, with a woman dragging the head along by its hair, and the bloody sack with the pieces of the child. (244)

This aggrieved Colonel Aureliano Buendía and he felt the same anger as he "had felt in his youth over the body of a woman who had been beaten to death because she had been bitten by a rabid dog" (244). García Márquez incorporates these lesser known occurrences in the novel to

highlight the gross human rights violation, the imperialism of the banana company and the forced despotic rule that is endemic to the region. He reiterated in a number of interviews that his works are based on reality. Being a journalist cum writer, this comes to him effortlessly; therefore his works teem with political and social implications. Regina James succinctly notes that "his fellow novelists recognized in the novel a brilliant evocation of many of their own concerns: a 'total novel' that treated Latin America socially, historically, politically, mythically, and epically, that was at once accessible and intricate, lifelike and self-consciously, self-referentially fictive" (7). A remarkable feature of the novel is that besides recreating history and blurring the line between history and fiction, it highlights the process of selection, interpretation and narrativity involved in historiography. The novel interrogates the idea of history with definite borders. Moreover, the gap between the real past and its representation is underscored. It foregrounds the partiality of the historical knowledge and invites the reader to rethink and reconceptualize the past from multiple perspectives.

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