

Malleable Time and Magic Realism in Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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ABSTRACT

Time is often characterised as an unseen element, ephemeral and yet ever present in the background to any narrative, wherein the action unfolds in the foreground. However, in the hands of a masterful writer like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, it becomes malleable and prone to manipulation, such that it becomes a key element in the novel. In one of the most celebrated books by Marquez—*One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), the unending quality of South American Dictatorship is articulated through a novelised version of time where any distinction between the past and present disappears. It reorganises time from being a sequence, a teleological chronology, to being a vast temporal collage. This kind of time, at times stagnant, perpetuates patriarchy's omnipresence. In contrast, in his later novel, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), Marquez is able to fragment the image of the central character into a symphony of perspectives, enabling a multi-perspectival impression of various individuals vis-à-vis the protagonist, which is made visible in the text.

INTRODUCTION

What makes *One Hundred Years of Solitude* a much more engaging read is how the movement of time is not arrested and is registered vividly throughout the narrative. Phases of time do not simply drop into the past but are traced and tracked down in some senses to the very point when even the capacity to remember an event falls into oblivion and time is tackled to the point where it becomes non-existent. The story starts with an ominous rumour, which results in a violent retaliation, leading to numerous killings and bloodshed. But it's not this literal death that occupies center stage in this magnum opus by Marquez. It is the death of a memory of a life lived that this master storyteller encapsulates in his work. Therefore, what the reader witnesses is that time stalks people not only in their lives but after their deaths, too. For Marquez's maternal grandmother, Doña Tranquilina, dead people have an afterlife in the memories of those alive. Nevertheless, time eventually leads to a second death for those whose memories too fail to exist in the human consciousness, effacing the very last traces from the world they once inhabited. Marquez connected this with the larger question of South American culture and their propensity to undertake immense enterprises and dramas played out at three levels—individual time, historical time and geological time.

Marquez, in one of his interviews, stated that the inspiration to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude* came to him from a passage in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, wherein one witnesses the dwindling of history within an expanse of geological time indicative of a radical pessimism that swept across the late nineteenth century. One of the important moments in European modernism is when time as an entity displaces man from the centre of the universe. Marquez draws from this and is able to generate the idea of human time in a way that could be available only to a South American consciousness. We can say that he is very much an inheritor of modernism as much as he deploys times as not something one can take for granted. Rather, time itself becomes an object of manipulation, but it never indicates any disinterest in lived lives. Marquez expostulates that one needs a different yardstick to chart the South American reality. Therefore, he excelled in bringing in elements of magic realism in his narrative, whose sources were often from European modernism. A detailed, self-conscious, and nuanced understanding of myths, superstitions, and the rich history of South America helped enable a generative archive of sources for magic realism. Marquez's writing treated everything alive; the inanimate became animated, and there were no static signifiers in the background. For example, the novel begins with the newly constituted town of Macondo, whose pristine composition is compared to that of the Garden of Eden. It needs to be highlighted that for Marquez, there can be no linear allegory. Here, though,

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Macondo is presented as a utopian beginning. Nevertheless, it is doomed to oblivion together with a realisation that it is being set amongst the ruins of an earlier settlement. This town here projects the idea of a community as an ideal. However, the paradox lies in the fact that José Arcadio Buendía's authority is based on his ability to subsume individual interest in that of the community and an egalitarian arrangement, which highlights that the community takes precedence over an individual. It is the atmosphere that envelops the spirit of the town, which is far more crucial than individual privacy (which is stereotypically the focus of classic domestic novels). Marquez expresses his idea of the collective in an image that is quintessentially Marquezian and replete with magic; that is, the life of the community actually breaks out into music, the sheer joy with which he unravels Arcadio's activities which are inseparable from the life of the community. Therefore, the sadness of the inevitable oblivion does not stifle the new music, the new magic. Unique to Marquez here is that he never loses sight of the popular democratic ideal despite his fatalism. The hope for achieving a better society never dies, irrespective of the looming threat of the capitalist enterprise. Even though he exposes his characters to the withering effects of time, his love for them is ever-present.

Time and memory as its adjuncts are intricately linked in the text and occupy much of the textual preoccupation. The very first page of the text invokes a fleeting memory as it refuses to grant any event-memory-individual the status of permanent truth immune to the erosion of time. As soon as an event occurs, it is already a fragment of a memory, of nostalgia, but on the other hand, this very nostalgia, in its own crippled way, becomes a means of retrieval of the past and is a constant companion of each character in the novel. This memory is not indicative of a factual truth. For example, one of the characters—Úrsula Iguarán, carries with her many biases, superstitions, and prejudices as she remembers the past. Her memory, the very act of remembering, is vulnerable to all of these, yet they make the passage of time visible. This fragmentary remembering also becomes an impediment against the perpetual movement of events towards oblivion. This explains the enormous nostalgia the dead in the text feel for the living. The ghosts in the text are not frightening but rather presented as lonely, burdened with the knowledge that everyone would soon forget one, such is the disruptive power of time, which Marquez presents through the use of magic realism throughout the novel.

Another remarkable aspect of the novel is that in spite of its magical unravelling of time, it does not blind us to the enormous involvement with which the author delineates his individuals. Jose Arcadio finally gives in to madness while being endlessly tied to a tree till his death. Ursula, never fails or lacks in performing her duties. Nobody ever gets lost in this vast novel, which is crowded with people. Nevertheless, it never seeks to impose any order on the inherent chaos. Every life is meticulously followed to its end. An apt example would be the character of Aureliano Buendía. His character is fleshed out from his life as a young man with skilled craftsmanship and sharp judgement. The author creates a strong connection between himself and this character to the extent that after Aureliano's death, the author's grief is reflected in the novel itself. As readers, we see the entire process of meticulous orchestration and labour that is put in to create a character like Aureliano—his fearless curiosity, clear-eyed way of looking at things, and concentrated intensity of purpose—expressed in his ability to come out of impossible situations and sustain a larger than life career as a colonel. With the help of this character, Marquez is able to forward his own liberal views, like the desire to marry an ostracised girl who works as a prostitute and liberate her. Within the third-world landscape of poverty, ruthless exploitation, illness and diseases, the Colonel's vision of a better world is shown. His image, at times, is representative of an omniscient, immortal dictator sustained by the orchestration of simulated images. Thus, the individual figure becomes a collage of bits and pieces of images of various times. Aureliano acquires a legendary reputation as a ubiquitous colonel, and his reputation becomes capable of bearing multiple rumours. His personality, at one stage, threatens to spin out of reality and tends to become a vast shadowy mess of rumours. Even the libertarian trajectory of Aureliano's power runs into the danger of being overrun by the instincts for power. His popularity among people can take on mythical proportions—is symptomatic of a good example of the practice of popular politics in a third-world country. Rumours around him make investment in him much more desirable than in conservative politics, as his constituency is the people. His campaigns are financially sponsored by the people and not by the elite rich. His hard-line and non-compromising politics make him a formidable character in the novel. As the liberal party begins to grow (similar to the history of most left parties in the world), a faction of it begins to manoeuvre for positions in the central government. When this happens, Aureliano does not join them or make any compromises, rather, he moves further left and aligns himself with the most marginalised people. One may say that Marquez has made Aureliano a hero, but he shows us that such cohesive politics do not stay forever. Describing that power has its own logic and challenges such non-compromising politics, what results in the downfall here is Aureliano's pride, assertion of inflexible authority that is unable to remain conscious of its own starting principles. Therefore, without romanticising his revolutionary agenda, the novel is critical of the governance by the power, that is, one ridden with pride and the other as— the state that has no real idea about the people of this town. They have arrived to arbitrarily impose laws that do not work in accordance with the life in Macondo. Aureliano represents the commitment to the autonomy of this community, an opposition to a remote centralised power. As Aureliano ages, he eventually realises that there is no one to fight with him anymore. All his comrades are either dead or very old, and then comes back time in the novel. Marquez has this amazing ability to deploy time as history that sustains political history. It is history that is articulated

through images and through imagination. Time does not follow any linear charting or cartesian realism; rather, time showcases the production of configurations that emblemise history. Macondo's integral order of life is pushed into an irreversible decay once it is taken over by the Banana company, ushering in a process of disintegration. As this happens, Macondo is pushed to the point of extreme inactivity. The geological time starts to envelop the historical time through the inexorable advancing of nature. The family house is inundated with red ants—end of human settlement by nature.

Marquez dexterously maps the movement of time throughout the novel. There is slow transformation of historical time, forces unleashed by human beings like imperialism, ruthless killings, capitalist setting industries, civil wars etc—to the geological time wherein inversion takes place through forces of nature and takeover of human settlement. This movement from the unravelling of individual lives through time onto a crumbling of settlements is mapped out in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Co-existing with this time and movement is also the time that works itself through the minuteness of individual lives. Such is the temporal sweep of this novel. Human subjects are marginalised in the face of the vast geological conflict between human settlements and nature. The disintegration of the town of Macondo is intertwined with the final movement of the lives of people we as readers have known throughout the novel. Characters we have known as young and energetic are slowly consumed by old age and end with death, almost indicative of the debris of history, that has lost its ability to renew.

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