

Reflections on European Modernity and its Impact on Premodern Sensibility and Society

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Abstract

The idea of literature as a record of collective human consciousness is a departure from the Eurocentric enunciation of realism and individualism. This proposition reflects an artistic reaction whose implications pose challenge at philosophical and epistemological planes against all those concepts, ideas and notions that went into the making of European Enlightenment and Humanism. Of all the great Latin American writers, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's writing can be read as a critique of the values of Modernity and Enlightenment, which the paper intends to explore, in opposition to which postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial thoughts have developed their critical discourses. In the novelistic form, involving a very nuanced reaction against European art and thought, Marquez has tried to capture a vanishing Premodern human sensibility in a mode that is both comic and tragic, fantastic and realistic. He allegorises the loss of an organic mode of life which could not survive the moment it came into contact with the outside world. At a symbolic level, it suggests alienation and death of the ethnic communities and racial groups, disintegration of the native culture and indigenous pattern of life, which the paper will discuss, in the age of globalisation and growing integration of the world. The whole experience is so cataclysmic that it generates a deep sense of remorse and nostalgia in the reader. Marquez not only makes one conscious of the rupture at the level of

human perception, his narrative contains element of parody of the discourse of progress, European scientific and psychological thoughts.

Keywords: Marquez, Modernity, Premodern, Globalisation, Alienation, Culture

The relation of literature with life and thought is very complex. Literature can be defined as a record of individual consciousness or unconsciousness. The idea of individual is perhaps one of the most important discoveries of the European literature and thought that led to the advent of Modern Era or the Age of Enlightenment. It is indeed one of the most significant epochs in the history of mankind which changed the very course of the progress of civilisations. The birth of European Modernity is identified with Cartesian consciousness, a peculiar spirit of inquiry and knowledge developed on the discourses of sanctity of knowledge, progress and enlightenment. As A.C. Grayling writes: “It was a revolution in thought across the whole range of enquiries – and it required a liberation of the mind, a giving of permission by the mind to itself to think freely without fear and preconception” (16). This new development of scientific enquiry and its associated beliefs are considered to have caused epistemological schism as well as rupture at different levels of human life and thought including social order and political institutions on which postmodern and poststructural thoughts have developed critical discourses. The birth of this new age or spirit, found enunciation in the form of colonialism and later on globalisation, changed the entire order of civilisations, social and political organisations and the general pattern of life beyond the Continent. It created discontents at different planes that constitute a recurrent theme of the Postcolonial literature to which Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1928-2014) has probably given the most iconic expression in his novels, particularly, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and in some of his early stories, which constitute the background of this study.

Though Marquez is very objective in his narration and he has downplayed historicity of events, the reader hardly fails to find parallels in his imagination of historical and contemporary social and political realities beyond the regional context. Therefore, the temporal and spatial range of his writing is very wide. He has tried to capture a premodern human sensibility, a unique mode of life and thought that remained preserved for a very long time but it could not survive in seclusion the moment it came into contact with the outer world. Though the life is full of erotic pleasure and natural freedom, it is hard to miss the gruesome death and destruction, war and violence hence the juxtaposition of strange, macabre and funny. All these aspects of life have been presented in, what the critic Griffin calls, “a Kaleidoscope, or spectrum, of comic narration” (94). His narrative is marked with humour and a tone of playfulness, yet it is difficult to miss the profound sense of sadness at the tragic disappearance of a mode of life and thought that probably was no more inferior to what Modern Europe imposed on the rest of the world. Marquez has explored a mode of human life, which the European civilisation has either forgotten or because of its misconception of rationalism, enlightenment and progress, has shamelessly ignored. Had it not been so the behaviour of the people the European sociologists called the primitive would have appeared less strange and alien. By reminding the reader of the past and present of mankind, Marquez has been able to draw universal sympathy.

Since for Marquez, the novel is a record of collective unconsciousness of mankind, a departure from the Eurocentric notion, his exploration of life is of anthropomorphic importance for New historicists and sociologists. Critics have applied different historical and political approaches to his works. But one should remain open to the fact that the implications of his perception of human life go beyond the immediate temporal and geographical limits, scientific and psychological studies.

Marquez discovered an alternative mode of writing fiction in his art of characterisation, technique of narration and exploration of collective consciousness. It is a way of distancing oneself from the dominant European theory of art and literature. His unique way of storytelling has its root in the tradition of oriental romance. He floods the attention of the reader with a flux of events blurring the line between reality and fantasy. In this circular mode of narration, the past and the present coexist and the narration moves forward and backward in time in rapid succession. Such a mode of narration is conspicuous by its absence in North American and European novel.

Marquez's microcosm is of symbolic significance. Macondo, the recluse locale of his novels, has in fact assumed a mythical dimension with reference to his works. His novels with their multiple themes like hunger and poverty, love and war, science and magic, madness and eccentricity, encompassing different dimensions of the actual life, constitute the reality of the unique life, culture and history of Macondo. Therefore, geography is indispensable in Marquez. Hence, there have been attempts to see his works in the light of contemporary Latin American social and political history. For instance, Gerald Martin in his historical and sociological approach to the *One Hundred Years of Solitude* suggests that the Buendia "is a metaphor for the history of the continent" (97). The locale and the life of the Buendia are symbolic of a society in which one can have a glimpse of a vanishing culture.

At a symbolic plane, Marquez's characters are the endangered representatives of a mode of life that characterised the spontaneity of life of the premodern men. This behaviour gradually became burden of collective unconsciousness of the industrial civilisation. In the consciousness of his characters science and magic, knowledge and superstition, are indistinguishable. Such a sensibility contrasts with the modern rational sensibility which takes pride in drawing distinctions between science and magic, science and superstition, separating the rational and irrational in human life and thought.

Marquez seems to suggest that insanity is inherent in human life. That is why, despite their individual peculiarities, his characters remain part of their inclusive society. It is an affirmation that man, apart from being rational, is necessarily an irrational creature. The novelist explores this unconscious side of man's life through the behaviour of his characters through a variety of incidents and actions. As one takes a philosophical view of their existence, they hardly seem to be suffering from spiritual crisis. They pursue their instinctual life without any inhibition. Insanity of love and Life constitutes one of the recurrent themes in Marquez's novels of which his great work *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985) is a classic example.

Marquez enhances the irrationality of man to such an extent that he seems to question the very vision of man as the European civilisation has conceived it. If the birth of the Modern Era marked the glorification of the potentiality of human reason, leading to the development of science and man's material progress, literature has always been concerned with the potentiality of the sensual spirituality. It is in this sense that literature is, what Marquez calls in *Love in the Time of Cholera* "the ethical management of forgetfulness" (189). Despite all changes in Macondo, colonial education and proselytisation and conservative catholic morality, all is not lost. Life is still full of vitality, which is reflected in reckless and impulsive love. Marquez depicts an exuberant world characterised by the spirit of celebration and festivity, or what Kundera calls in a remarkable expression, the "culture of excess" (31).

Buendia's perception and pursuit of science, which seem to be irrational and impulsive, is of symbolic and philosophical significance. Marquez seems to suggest that the idea of wealth and power is inseparable from man's quest for scientific knowledge. Human endeavour for knowledge has been driven by political domination and subjugation. It makes one sceptical of the very idea of the sanctity of knowledge, of the colonial claim of modernisation and civilisation. By accommodating multiple incidents with political and cultural implications, Marquez indirectly seems to suggest that the whole colonial mission of civilisation and

enlightenment was primarily a pursuit of material control and to induce conformity in the natives for exploitation. By focusing on the peculiar habits, idiosyncrasies, individualistic tendencies and the inner motives of his characters the novelist asserts that man cannot be measured by any particular rationalistic parameter. Hence, the clash between tradition and modernity, science and superstition, sophistication and crudity, often cast in comic and humorous terms with some philosophical implications, a recurrent theme in Marquez. In this sense, his novels can be read as a postcolonial critique of European civilisation, science, philosophy and literature, social and political institutions. Through a variety of incidents, he exposes the relativity of human truth and values, the fundamental difference in the perception of a premodern civilisation driven by the logic of sensation and an advanced European civilisation proud of the logic of intellect. It challenges the concepts that were formed through historical, legal, scientific and sociological discourses in the western consciousness since the sixteenth century about the people of Latin America.

Marquez is a remarkable social observer. He has integrated in his narrative events which shaped the larger reality of the region, as critics have pointed out. For instance, Martin thinks that in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the massacre in the banana company after the native workers struck the work is an allusion to the historical massacre, which took place on December 5, 1928 under General Carlos Cortes Vargas (107). The playful fabric of his narrative is interwoven with the mournful thread of gruesome regional reality. Unlike his later works, his early writing, like, *No One Writes to The Colonel* (1958), reads like social and political indictment. The novella, set in the decaying Colombian town of Macondo, deals with the plight of a war veteran and his wife. Left in abject poverty, there is nothing in the house but a rooster, a symbol of the memory of their dead son. The story reveals a lot about Marquez's sense of justice, social and political concerns which find symbolic expression in his later works. Examining the grim social reality in the adversity of the colonel's life, Prieto maintains that *No*

One Writes to the Colonel is “a brilliantly terse indictment of social injustice in Latin America” (33). Similarly, Cardwell perceives that the writer is not oblivious of the marginalised individuals of his society whose struggle is no less heroic. In his shorter fiction like *No One Writes to the Colonel* “Marquez seems to be attracted to humble, unassuming people who, while often poor or crushed by life’s adversities, can nevertheless, demonstrate enormous resourcefulness, can still find the courage of spiritual heroism to resist oppression and defeat” (06).

War Veterans constitute an important section of the region due to frequent civil war, political instability, brutal dictatorship, war of liberation. Marquez draws attention to the misery of those who did national service. He tries to comprehend the irony of the situation which is full of contradictions. Prieto rightly comments on the social realism in the story: “It is perhaps the most political and far reaching of his novels” (42). It depicts a grim social and political betrayal and injustice.

No One Writes to the Colonel (1958) is deeply rooted in the social reality of the Caribbean culture. It shows gradual social and political transformation as the outsiders enter the town with new scientific inventions, medicine and products of daily use, and how immigration affects the life of the native who seems to be at the receiving end, while the immigrants are getting richer, an irony of which the colonel’s wife seems to be well aware when she tells her husband that while they are dying of starvation: “There’s my friend Sabas with a two-story house that isn’t big enough to keep all his money in, a man who came to this town selling medicines with a snake curled around his neck” (46). The town has kept its gate open to the outsiders. It is inhabited by the Spanish, the Turks and the Arab who have set up business to make money. Many of them are men of doubtful characters, quacks who hovering around the town and cheating the natives have become prosperous.

By describing the marginalisation and economic deprivation of the local inhabitants, Marquez raises some moral questions. Such treatment of certain individuals, as soldiers in Columbia or farmers in some agrarian societies, is common in most of the decolonised countries with a developing economy. Those who gave their blood for national liberation, and those who contributed with their sweat to social welfare and prosperity are often condemned to live on the margin of their life. Marquez symbolically offers a glimpse of the making of globalisation and its human cost. It badly affects the natives who find it difficult to compete in a free market economy. The novelist however was able to foresee some of the contradictions which economists later converted into a powerful discourse.

The outside world and its developments are not absent from Marquez's narrative. Though he describes everything in a comic mode, it would be immoral to put aside somewhat abstract implications of some of the events in his narrative, while remaining very much conscious that these philosophical ramifications are secondary to humour. He neither denounce nor deny the benevolence of colonialism. He makes one conscious what it did to the organic societies which did not have immunity to suffer its shock. It was European colonialism and later on globalisation which led to the gradual destruction of these people. The natives are fascinated as well as suspicious in their interaction with the outsiders, who symbolically represent colonisers. They have still not become accustomed to the marvel of one invention that they are dazzled by the images of new miracles. The changes are so rapid that the people who were once slumbering find it now very difficult to get naturalised. It creates a sense of alienation in them.

Colonialism and globalisation have radically changed the geographical and political condition of south America. Globalisation not only imposes conformity on the powerless people whose mode of life is so different, it condemns those who do not change to die on the margin of life. Marquez seems to rue that with the advancement of science and technology and

subsequent phenomenon of globalisation and cultural homogenisation, ethnicities, minority races and cultures are facing extinction. He is deeply apprehensive of their existence. This apocalyptic vision permeates his writing.

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