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### Decoding 'The Natural' in Marquez's *Innocent Erendira*

Abstract: Exploitation is the central theme that looms over Marquez's short story *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother*. But unlike its other readings, this paper is an attempt to view this text as an ecocentric discourse. This 'green reading' considers the central character of the story Erendira as the soul force of Nature, upon whom humans exert their dominance and relentlessly wage war with one another for her possession. Within the text, instances can be identified where this power relation becomes evident. A close analysis of such elements is made from an ecocentric perspective to bring out an effective discourse that pleads against the careless treatment of nature. A closer analysis of the text will open before us the argument that Nature cannot exist - unbruised and free - where Man and his anthropocentric ideologies exert dominance. The 'natural' images made use of in the short story compliments to the argument of this project. This paper seeks to analyze the role of these images in transcending the meaning of the story and to bring out the various ecological concerns behind them.

Keywords – Eco-criticism, Exploitation, Marquez, Nature, Matriphagous

#### 1. Introduction

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's works are always regarded best not just because of their imaginative splendor but also for their almost unperceivable bushy undergrowth of relevant and contemporary issues. The world knows him mostly as the greatest practitioner of Magic Realism. But his works are not just a blend of fantasy and reality, but a carefully organized record of the histories, traditions and myths of his motherland. His short story *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother* is no exception. *Innocent Erendira* is one story where the reader gets lost within the layers of meaning embedded within the text. Deciphering them is a strenuous task as well as an enlightening one. The repulsive 'setting' of the story and its 'not-so-innocent' nature adds to this complexity. Exploitation is the central theme that looms over Marquez's tale. But the questions like 'of what?' and 'by whom?' are left for the reader to figure out.

The original Spanish version of the story *La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Erendira y de su abuela desalmada* was published in 1972. The English translation by Gregory Rabassa appeared in 1978. According to Diane E. Marting, the short story "is based on an experience when, as a sixteen year old, Garcia Marquez saw an eleven year old girl working as a prostitute... accompanied by a woman whom he presumed to be a relative" (176). A seed of an idea was planted in the writer's mind. Since then, Marquez had been trying incessantly to tell their tale.

We first come across this young prostitute in his much acclaimed work *Cien años de Soledad* (1967), which was translated as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1979. A Character in the novel, Colonel Aureliano Buendia, as a young boy, meets this girl under circumstances similar to that of the author himself. But Marquez could not stop there. He wrote a screenplay based entirely on her story, which "was never filmed although fragments have been published" (Marting 177). The seed was only growing and it took time for it to reach maturity. Despite his failure in putting his story to the big-screen, he after some years rewrote

it as a short fictional narrative, which was in turn made into a screenplay by the author himself to be filmed in 1983 by the Brazilian director Ruy Guerra.

Since its publication in 1972, it has led many critical minds to come up with several distinctive interpretations ranging from Marxist, feminist and post-colonial to mythical ones. This singular work is an attempt to read this text from an ecocritical perspective. A 'green reading' would unravel before the reader the discreet imageries made use of by Marquez in shaping a discourse that pleads against the careless treatment of the natural world. Staying close to the essence of ecocriticism, the natural images in the text are brought into the central locus. The role of these images in transcending the meanings of the story and the various ecological concerns behind them are underlined.

## 2. What Happens in the Text?

Gabriel Garcia Marquez unfolds a dark and mysterious tale in *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Erendira and Her Heartless Grandmother*. The solitary and repulsive setting of the story contributes to the purpose of constructing an air of uneasiness around the characters. The story deals with the life of a fourteen year old girl named Erendira, forced into prostitution by her own grandmother. Marquez uses magic realism throughout the story which serves as an alienating agent that reminds the reader that the events described before him is indeed fiction. One cannot bear with the daunting and sultry mood of the story if it was not for this. From the very beginning we can identify the theme of exploitation in the story. This paper will focus on reading this story as an exploitative saga of Mankind and Mother Nature.

“Erendira was bathing her grandmother when the wind of her misfortune began to blow” (244). We see this wind of misfortune again in the story at several instances changing Erendira's life in drastic ways. It was this force of nature, almost like a character in the story,

knocked down the candle that Erendira forgot to put out and caused the fire that destroyed her grandmother's mansion and tightened the grip of slavery on Erendira. The only path left before the grandmother for re-acquiring the immense loss caused by her granddaughter's carelessness was to sell her very body until every penny lost was regained. And Erendira was too 'innocent' to realize the menacing selfishness of her grandmother that she succumbed to this miserable fate so easily.

Erendira stands out as a symbol of the Soul Force of Nature and her grandmother along with her customers represent humanity itself. Though everyone inherits equal rights in using the nature for their sustenance, it is always those in power who dictates how much each one shall get. Here the grandmother is in power. The need for sustenance is symbolized as the act of lovemaking. We hear the grandmother saying, "In any case, love is just as important as eating" (254). She sells 'Erendira's love' for money. Nature is divided and auctioned off for profit.

"It is an oppressive environment. The sun's glare and the khaki colour of the landscape are demoralising" (Kiely 6). The reference is to Guajira desert where the story is set. "The house was far away from everything, in the heart of the desert, next to a settlement with miserable and burning streets where goats committed suicide from desolation when the wind of misfortune blew" (245). Marquez notes that our central characters were in a way used to the solitude of the desert as well as the dangers of the wild nature. In the beginning we see Erendira going through her daily chores, obeying her grandmother's commands. Without Erendira her grandmother is incapable of doing anything. But her services are taken for granted and she is considered as mere property.

After the destruction of their house, grandmother is seen travelling with Erendira throughout the village, thereby beginning her miserable plight of being a prostitute. Her first customer was a village storekeeper, known for the good price he paid for virginity. Though

he agreed to have Erendira, he was in disapproval of her body. After thorough examination he conceded that she was quite immature. And his act of lovemaking became an act of mutilation. The setting where Erendira lost her virginity is so vividly explained by Marquez. "Placed on top of the adobe wall were pots with cacti and other plants of aridity" (250). The only speck of green found on the scene makes the reader despondent.

After having gained as much as she could from that village, the grandmother loaded Erendira on a truck and went searching for a new destination. The truck's loader made love with Erendira with great zeal and tenderness. He even asked the grandmother to let her go with him. Erendira was beginning to be transformed into something desirable. In their self-made shelter in the middle of nowhere, grandmother fixed up Erendira and began waiting for customers. Both the grandmother and a mailman (who passed by their tent) referred to Erendira as 'it', thereby denying her a human status. Men came from all places hearing about her and slowly the business began to flourish. With the customers came a photographer who surmised that the crowd in front of Erendira's tent might also be interested in taking photos. The spot almost resembles a tourist destination. The first thing the grandmother bought with the profit they made was a donkey as if Erendira was not enough to carry out her command

The story enters into an altogether different dimension with the entry of Ulises, the son of a rich Dutch farmer. What was thought to be a tale of exploitation suddenly changes into one that of a struggle for possession. Erendira "is the prize over which the battle is fought" (Beesley 26). But is there actually any difference between the intentions of the grandmother and Ulises? Grandmother wants her for economic profit and Ulises wants her for 'himself'. The fact that Erendira is in love with Ulises makes us want to support his cause. May be the reason why Erendira loves him is because he is not interested in mutilating her like her grandmother. But freedom is still a question that puzzles Erendira. As Diane E.

Marting contends, “The desire to set Erendira free from her victimisation is a major fictional objective” (184).

The intervention of the missionaries is yet another interesting factor. A group of monks who live in the nearby mission took upon themselves the responsibility of protecting Erendira. When they found that the grandmother was not going to give up Erendira, they kidnapped her and brought her over to the mission, where she was given a job of whitewashing the stairs. She was not free, but she was happy. We see a growing desire in the world to possess Erendira. The missionaries had enough power to hold Erendira under their custody. But the grandmother was cunning enough to get her married (to a boy whom she bribed for this singular deed) according to the rules of the mission. Once Erendira was in her possession, she got rid of the boy. But Erendira had been happy at the mission as there was no one there to use her for their personal gain. This experience strengthened her to flee her grandmother’s captivity, with Ulises. Never in their wildest imagination did they think that the grandmother would track them down. Desire for freedom in the slave was met with iron chains by the master.

But Ulises was not disheartened by this singular failure. Earlier as he set out to elope with Erendira, he had stolen his father’s truck and three oranges from their grove- oranges that naturally grow priceless diamonds inside them (Ulises and his father used to smuggle these across the border). But now he leaves home with nothing but firm determination. Even though he manages to find Erendira, he could not convince her to leave her captor. At the suggestion of Erendira he considers the prospect of killing the grandmother. After two failed attempts of poisoning her and bombing her, he stabs her to death.

After the deed Ulises is stained with the green blood of the grandmother. In bitter realization of cruelty he had committed, he began acting hysterically. But we see a strange transformation taking place in Erendira. The story itself is transfigured. “Its romantic

tendencies become ironic, its love story vestigial, its muckraking protest against the grandmother and her ilk, in contrast, moves into the foreground” (Marting 187). Erendira is seen grabbing the gold vest that consisted of the money made by her toil and then she ran into the desert, away from the sea and far away from Ulises. The writer concludes the story with an air of finality by saying that Erendira “was never heard of again nor was the slightest trace of her misfortune ever found” (292).

### 3. Mankind as Matriphagous Creatures

The author presents before us a world devoid of greenery where the sight of non human life is so rare. “There was a cistern in the courtyard for the storage of water carried over many years from *distant springs* (my italics) on the backs of Indians” (245). These distant springs can be seen as a symbol of life amidst a world of lifelessness. Sharing is necessary for the thriving of life. Selfishness brings forth an opposite effect. We see the grandmother storing all the water for herself. What were meant for all became personal properties of powerful individuals. We see greed prevailing over need.

Though intellect and reason are associated with humans while distinguishing them from animals, it is observed that they are more anxious and aggressive than animals in fulfilling the needs of their body. Without nature it is impossible for them to do so. As explained earlier, these needs are signified in the story by the act of lovemaking. Scarcity generates demand. Thus the number of men wanting to ‘have’ Erendira goes up statistically, literally every day. But the difference in their perception of ‘having’ is striking. The village storekeeper’s approach to her is the commonest of all: “...twisted her arm by the wrist, and dragged her to the hammock... he replied with solemn slap which lifted her off the ground... He grabbed her about the waist... and held her down with his knees” (250).

Marquez’s description points to the extensive urban reformations that led to the

mutilation of nature. But we also see the truck's loader, who "was different, slow and wise, and he ended up taming her with tenderness" (251). This was a relaxing experience for Erendira. One is easily reminded of how the native inhabitants treated the land. They took what they wanted but they always practiced what the modern man refers to as sustainable development. But the modern man knows only to preach and remains idle when it comes to practice. They consume vigorously the force that ensures their sustenance. In this respect, Man has transformed himself as a matrophagous creature.

There are references in the text that comments on the conscious interconnections between the various elements in nature. For instance, when Erendira is being raped by the village storekeeper the omniscient narrator notes, "Over the whistle of the storm and the lash of the water one could hear distant shouts, the howling of far-off animals, the cries of a shipwreck" (250). Her agony is projected by the natural world around her. The wind of misfortune is another such element. As Frank Beesley rightly concedes:

Garcia Marquez involves the wind in the story's events on thirty-eight occasions, not merely commenting upon the weather but developing the wind as an active character which produces affective consequences in the same way the Abuela (the grandmother) does and even more than Ulises is able to do. (25)

We see the wind of misfortune in action only when Erendira is mentally anguished, afraid or physically worn out. This strange connection can be identified throughout the story. Wind, with its superior power, tries to annihilate the man-made structures hoping that it would free Erendira (Mother Nature). But natural calamities always prove to be more disastrous to nature itself than to humans. A city destroyed by a storm or a hurricane is rebuilt again by humans, squeezing more life out of nature. Likewise, the actions of the wind in the story, though with the hidden intention of helping Erendira, brought more trouble to her.

The places where the grandmother camped with Erendira can be easily related to a tourist destination. The mailman becomes their ambassador as he spreads the word around. Men came from faraway places. The presence of the photographer adds more life to this picture. Though he was not directly involved in the sexual exploitation of Erendira, he began utilising the crowd at the encampment by taking their photographs. Within a short span of time, Erendira was transformed as an icon of sensual desires. Boards began appearing at the encampment saying, “ERENDIRA IS BEST; LEAVE AND COME BACK – ERENDIRA WAITS FOR YOU; THERE IS NO LIFE WITHOUT ERENDIRA” (279). Posters were made for trucks, bearing the words “I THINK OF YOU, ERENDIRA” (277). Erendira became an exotic resort - an oasis in the desert.

Tourism can be regarded useful for the growth of a nation’s economy. But the way things are right now, nothing is more menacing than tourism when speaking from an eco-centric perspective. Tourism proliferated the rate of pollution. In his text, Marquez included an adequate image that corresponds to this fact. After all the soldiers of the local garrison made love with Erendira, each one entering the tent according to their turn, one after the other in a single day, “...Erendira was unable to repress the trembling in her body, and she was in sorry shape, *all dirty with soldier sweat* (my italics)” (257). Nature is stained with human sweat that manifests itself in the form of inorganic toxic wastes.

In their first meeting together, Erendira tells Ulises that she is going to die. He replies, “My mother says that people who die in the desert don’t go to heaven but to the sea” (260). Though this be a seemingly absurd statement, a major ecological problem is discussed here by Marquez. Erendira (Mother Nature) speaks from the desert. It was her grandmother (Mankind) who brought her to the desert and occasioned this dry and accursed state of her existence. The whole setting is beaming with heat. The writer portrays a world suffering from the onslaught of global warming. Polar ice is melting tremendously, and the sea water level is

rising every day at an alarming pace. As stated in an article from *The New York Times*, “Rising seas dramatically increase the odds of damaging floods from storm surges” (Revkin). Ulises’ remark gains importance in this respect. Though the journey of Erendira to the sea after her death seems improbable, the implication is that the sea might come to her. If things go on like this, Marquez concedes, Erendira (Mother Nature) will die and the sea will consume everything.

In the first part of the story the grandmother reigns unchallenged over Erendira. The struggle for possession begins as the missionaries make their entry into the story. We know that the western religions hold a belief that humans are the masters of everything non-human. The Christian missionaries in the story preach this idea and entertain physical force in practice of it. The right for keeping Erendira under her mastery was deprived off the grandmother. The missionaries kidnapped Erendira and brought her over to the mission. Her hair was cut and a hermit’s cassock was put on her. They transfigured her forcefully as if she was their property. Even the civil authorities dared not to indulge in the affairs of god. We can sense a sharp critique of the anthropocentric religious ideologies in the writer.

The prime opposite of the grandmother is Ulises. Named after the great Greek hero Odysseys, he is relentless in rescuing Erendira from the clutches of her evil grandmother. Even though he is inspired by divine love, he is as selfish as the grandmother. For both of them, possession of Erendira is the ultimate goal. After falling in love with Erendira, we see a strange ability in Ulises to change the colour of the glass items that he touches. It only works with things made out of glass. This is reflective of his perception of Erendira as something as beautiful and delicate as glass and his notion that he can add colour to her life. The name he invented for her, “Aridnere” (272), is in the exact reverse order of her real name, suggesting that he wants to alter her very self in the name of love. Ironically, the word Aridnere contains “the root of the Spanish *àrida*, with a strong signification of dryness and barrenness” (Beesley

26). The text once again asserts that all things humans do, though with profuse love in spirit, are essentially selfish in nature.

Towards the end of the story we see the struggle between grandmother and Ulises entering a stage of physical aggression. Erendira, as she is 'innocent' as the writer puts it, cannot harm her own grandmother. Thus Ulises takes up the job. In the final desperate act, he kills off the grandmother and sets Erendira free. Nature, seemingly 'innocent' Mother Nature, watches with impassivity as humans annihilate each other for the sake of her possession.

In the first part of the story, the omniscient narrator makes a remark, "The grandmother, naked and huge in the marble tub, looked like a handsome white whale" (244). As we read, we come to realize that she is in fact journeying towards the sea. She, in her delirious state while sleeping, is seen describing her precious past that is now gone forever. She laments her current predicament. A whale does not belong on the land. It does not hold any power in the land. Sea becomes a metaphor for power and wealth. The grandmother acquires both as she journeys toward the sea. She made a lot of money through Erendira and defeated the missionaries and Ulises, thus asserting her 'whaleness'. We witness her return, "...after half a lifetime of exile" (282), as if it was her destiny to die beside the sea.

About halfway across the story, we come across the mayor of a city, "...shooting with an army rifle at a dark and solitary cloud in the burning sky... trying to perforate it to bring on rain" (263). His efforts were in vain just as it was stupid. But it shows how desperate people are for a drop of water. As the omniscient narrator so vividly explains, there is not a speck of green where the story unfolds, and thus the rainlessness is not so great a problem that puzzles the reader. But where did all the green go? What caused this barrenness? I think we have an implicit answer to these questions as the story concludes. When Ulises stabbed the grandmother to death, her blood was all over him and "...it was oily blood, shiny and *green* (my italics)" (291). The grandmother (Mankind) had been consuming all the green of the

natural world as she resolutely exploited Erendira (Mother Nature). Finally, we see Erendira embracing freedom as all the green trapped inside her grandmother came out at once.

Another interesting element in the text is the author's conscious attempt to work out the maternal force in Erendira. This strengthens the eco-feminist rendering of the story. When they met for the first time Ulises was so afraid to have sex with Erendira and Marquez writes, "... she (Erendira) was calming him maternally" (260). Again as the story concludes, we see an anguished Ulises running after Erendira, who mercilessly left him, with "... painful shouts that were no longer those of a lover but of a son" (291). The Mother image in Erendira reaches maturity here.

Finally, we see Erendira running back into the desert, returning to "the solitude from which she emerged" (Kiely 7). She leaves even Ulises who was thought to be her only chance at survival and whom the reader misunderstood as her true love. The sea was her grandmother's dream, the dream of the whale. The whale dreamt of the sea because she knew that she would not be alone there. But Erendira is seen moving further away from the sea. This came from her bitter realisation that she cannot survive long at a place where she is considered as mere property. She flees into the desert that is devoid of human life. Mother Nature returns into a humanless space as it became evident that she cannot thrive where humans - matriphagous humans - exist and exert their dominion over her.

#### 4. Conclusion: After the 'Green' Reading

Ever since the dawn of mankind social inequalities and injustices were found to be a part of the world we live in. With the development of philosophic thought, humans began to reflect upon these issues and suggest possible solutions. Widespread campaigns were launched or sometimes wars were fought to resolve such problems. It is indeed a saddening fact that even after enduring such a long and violent history, nothing much has changed. And

anyone with enough rationality would agree that nothing is ever going to change. It is at this juncture that we should divert our focus into a much more real and imminent threat rather than repeating what had already been said or done.

What industrial revolution had set in action has become almost complete today. Our natural world is being devalued and mutilated by us that it now faces the sudden danger of total annihilation. Even though there are voices here and there pleading on 'mute' nature's behalf, they are unheard as there are other voices that are loud and strong, raised by the corporate giants and corrupt world leaders. If things go on like this a few more years, woe unto us. Therefore we must soon look into what is happening around us right now. We must soon cater to the needs of the present. A slight delay might even lead to our extinction. Before it happens we have a responsibility to spread the message and to initiate change.

Marquez's tale can be considered a message in this respect. How he discreetly wove in to the story, the elements that point to the exploitation of nature, is suggestive of how environmental problems lay unrecognized before us all these years. More attention should be paid to this text as an ecocentric discourse rather than as a purely literary one. The identification of Mother Nature in the central character Erendira alters the way we would otherwise look upon the story. The author presents before us the difference between a constructed image of nature and nature's real state through Erendira. A worn out and desecrated Erendira is celebrated all over the locale as an icon of sensuality. The urge to realize consumerist plots must not be left unattended.

Humans are identified as the prime culprits behind the current lamentable state of the natural world around us. The story is an assertion of the fact that humans are indeed matriphagous in nature. But the end of the story is a bit radical in the sense that modern man might find it hard to digest. Erendira is fleeing into the desert away from all human establishments suggesting that nature cannot flourish where the modern man and his

ideologies maintain power. Though this be a proper misanthropic ending, moderate ecocritics would agree that its function is only to provide fair warning. Let it be so. Imbibing the true spirit of this message, we must let go of our sense of superiority and strive hard towards the common goal of preparing a stage for the flourishing of all life forms, together and in harmony, on our young but weary planet. If we do not, then we deserve to be last of all the humans ever lived.

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