

## IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

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### *ABSTRACT*

*This paper is a preliminary attempt to explore Gabriel Garcia Marquez' treatment of women in his writing, drawing only a broad outline by extracting the main patterns of his novels—their movement, problems and trends, in order to illustrate how he has embedded in his narrative his worldview on women, particularly as he has employed them as literary characters.*

### **The Writer and the Man**

It is the intent of this paper to account for the way Marquez has depicted his female characters, primarily as they have been portrayed in a patriarchal matrix and to expose the sexist biases and stereotyped representations of women in his novels. This is also an attempt to expose the ways in which his female characters have survived male dominance.

In an attempt to discover just how a Colombia leftist liberal thinker like Marquez has portrayed women, an exploration of his novels shall be made in terms of the values propagated, the themes expanded, in order to further analyze the female characters' motives, attitudes and reactions. Such an interpretation

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would hopefully, give women readers who are perceptive enough to see the clues, a heightened understanding of their inherent worth and roles in society.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a liberal thinker whose left-wing politics has angered many conservatives politicians and heads of states. His admiration and sympathy towards Cuban government and Fidel Castro has resulted in his being denied entry to the United States for political reasons. This Nobel Prize for Literature awardee has sought political asylum in Europe, Venezuela and Mexico. Even before he reached the stature he holds in the literary circle today, Gabriel Garcia Marquez has constructed a poetic, symbolic universe where his ideas of God, heaven and hell, politics, sex and marriage have found the greatest aesthetic possibilities. It is a world where the boundaries between life and fiction have been blurred.

As a male writer who has gained international recognition for his bestselling narratives, Marquez has crossed the socio-political boundaries between poor and rich nations. As such, the importance of understanding the cultural as well as the ideological context of his novels must be underscored in order to prove the validity of the reading being undertaken.

It is a rare privilege Marquez is wielding with his pen, for in creating scenarios in which his literary characters interplay, he is providing clues to the historical context and ideological patterns which influence the way women around the world live, and how their society has trapped them or emancipated them.

It can be argued of course that even an enlightened liberal-thinking writer like Marquez, given the prevailing culture of the marginalization of women, could still fall into the trap of writing about the realities of a traditional male-oriented society.

Therefore, Marquez' response to the dominant male culture especially as it pertains to women's role in society is worth

examining, for in so doing an attempt could be made to understand and transform patriarchy both in literature in particular and in life, in general. Attempts could then be made to see how patriarchy and the dominant culture have diminished and damaged women, and whether or not these two formidable forces have forced them into the position of the marginalized, or The Other.

Three of Marquez' best-selling novels mirroring the complex realities of the human experience will be assessed: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *The General in His Labyrinth*, which will henceforth be referred to as OHYOS, LITTOC and TGIHL, respectively.

Instead of merely using a strictly formalist approach in order to look at the unity and integrity of the novels as they affect society's value system, I intend to juxtapose it with a feminist reading, using psychological insights to draw out overlapping themes and meanings in Marquez' novels.

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a complex novel set in the fictional town of Macondo against a backdrop of realism and fantasy that mirrors the history of Colombia. It chronicles the rise and fall of the Buendia family as they try to chart their place in a world that threatens to condemn them. The major characters Colonel Aureliano Buendia, Ursula, Jose Arcadio Buendia, Amaranta and Jose Arcadio Segundo go through a cycle of poverty, prosperity, growth, despair, war, strife and death.

*Love in the Time of Cholera* is a novel set in a quaint Caribbean village at a time when cholera threatens to wipe out its populace. At the forefront of which are two lovers, Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza whose young love had once been thwarted due to forces stronger than love itself. Ariza waits a total of 5,345 days to prove the sincerity of his love for her.

*The General in His Labyrinth* traces the trajectory of the General's political career from the time he is at the height of

power to the time when several assassination plots were being brewed against him until the time he meets his final days.

Because of the richness of feminist criticism and the various approaches with which a literary text may be analyzed, it is important to be clear about the objective in order to understand patriarchy as it operates in the Latin American milieu of Marquez' novels, to see whether it abets or deters the transformation of women.

The following images of women in terms of their definitive roles were revealed in the novels of Marquez.

### **The Wounded Woman**

The silently suffering victim is a lesser motif in Marquez's novels, but one which recurs in all three novels under scrutiny.

For instance, in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, America Vicuna, the adolescent waif left to Florentino Ariza's care is the epitome of pain and loss and is powerless when she discovers that her guardian-lover Florentino Ariza is in love with another woman. Her suffering is a powerful dramatization of a woman's helplessness in matters of the heart.

In a society where sexual aberration is taboo, the young America carries on an affair with her supposed guardian under the very nose of a conservative society. When she realizes that he would no longer look at her as a lover would, she succumbs to depression, and later, suicide. Her suffering manifests itself in poor academic performance and this change is deplorable because she was always at the top of her class before the unfortunate incident. Her erratic behavior takes on a magnitude that reveals the psychological implication of her suffering. Interestingly though, she knows that by taking her own life, she would be able to wield an even greater power over Ariza, more poignantly

than when she was alive, for her death on his account will taunt him throughout his old age.

When Leona Cassiani gave him the telegram announcing America Vicuna's death,

Florentino Ariza know in the depths of his soul that the story was incomplete. But no: America Vicuna had left no explanatory note that would have allowed anyone to be blamed for her decision. . . Florentino Ariza took a breath. The only thing he could do to stay alive was not to allow himself the anguish of the memory. He erased it from his mind, although from time to time in the years that were left to him he would feel it revive, with no warning and for no reason, like the sudden pang of an old scar. (LITTOC, 336).

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, we find a similar woundedness in the character of Rebecca, the adopted daughter of Ursula and Colonel Aureliano Buendia who has the peculiar habit of eating earth and peeling paint. This unthinkable act of gorging herself with something totally inedible is a metaphor for the psychic wound, the decay which she perceives in herself, and her inability to rid herself of it.

The first she did it almost out of curiosity, sure that the bad taste would be the best cure for the temptation. And, in fact, she could bear the earth in her mouth. But she persevered, overcome by the growing anxiety, and little by little she was getting back her ancestral appetite, the taste of primary minerals, the unbridled satisfaction of what was the original food. She would put handfuls of earth in her pockets, and ate them in small bits without being seen, with a confused feeling of pleasure and rage, as she instructed her girl friends in the most difficult needlepoint and spoke about other men, who did not deserve the sacrifice of having one eat the whitewash on the walls because of them. (OHYOS, 69).

A serious malady requiring medical treatment, Rebecca's condition offers a glimpse of the more serious psychological

disorder in her psyche, a kind of brokenness whose manifestations are revealed through her aberrant behavior. The act of eating peeling paint and earth is a metaphor for her personal crisis. It is a call for help.

In *The General in His Labyrinth*, the General has several encounters with “lines of funeral women in the villages along the river” (p. 98). “While he was on the barge he received the ranks of the widows, the impoverished, the helpless of all the wars who wanted to see him.” (ibid)

While not a prominent motif in the novel, these women would impinge on the General’s consciousness, long before he fades from the political arena.

### **The Sexually Uninhibited Woman**

An important theme that recurs in Marquez’ novels is one which explores female sexuality. His novels are replete with women who have unconventional relationships with men and who deviate from society’s standards of sexual behavior.

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Petra Cortes is an example of a sexually liberated woman. She engages in an uninhibited coupling with Aureliano Segundo and such acts of fornication dramatically increase the growth of rabbits in his household to the extent that she has had to raffle them off to their awed neighbors.

Other women in the novel who have unconventional relationships—Rebecca, Amaranta Ursula are perceived to be happier and more sympathetic than women like Amaranta and Fernanda del Carpio, who are portrayed as being totally unsympathetic because of their sternness and lack of a genuine interest in sex.

Other such characters resurface in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. For instance, Fermina Daza’s cousin Hildebranda is overwhelmed with sexual stirrings “. . . when Dr. Juvenal Urbino covered his

eyes and she saw the splendor of his perfect teeth between his rosy lips, she had felt an irresistible desire to devour him with kisses." (LITTOC, 136), to which Fermina Daza, perhaps out of jealousy or shock remarks, "What a whore you are." (ibid).

Such a remark was of course, not appropriate for a woman like Hildebranda who was far from being sexually aberrant and would pale in comparison with "the celebrated" Widow Nazaret, a woman whose life "was filled with love songs and provocative dresses decorated with macaws and spotted butterflies, and who began to share her body with anyone who cared to ask for it." (LITTOC, 150). She made it clear that "she would receive only men she liked, when she liked, how she liked, and without charging one red cent, because in her opinion it was the men who were doing her the favor." (ibid).

Her sexual encounters with Florentino Ariza were marked with exquisite drama as a prelude to the coupling.

She sat on the edge of the bed where Florentino Ariza was lying, not knowing what to do, and she began to speak to him of her inconsolable grief for the husband who had died three years earlier, and in the meantime she removed her widow's weeds and tossed them in the air until she was not even wearing her wedding ring. She took off the taffeta blouse with the beaded embroidery and threw it across the room onto the easy chair in the corner; she tossed her bodice over her shoulder to the other side of the bed; with one pull she removed her long ruffled skirt, her satin garter belt and funereal stockings, and she threw everything on the floor until the room was carpeted with the last remnants of her mourning. She did it with so much joy, and with such well-measured pauses, that each of her gestures seemed to be saluted by the cannon of the attacking troops, which shook the city down to its foundations. Florentino Ariza tried to help her unfasten her stays, but she anticipated him with a deft maneuver, for in five years of matrimonial devotion she learned to depend on herself in all phases of love, even the preliminary stages, with no help from anyone. Then she removed

her lace panties, sliding them down her legs with the rapid movements of a swimmer, and at last she was naked. (LITTOC, 149).

Ausencia Santander was another such character with a tremendous capacity for lovemaking and whom the sexually promiscuous Florentino Ariza would hanker for.

She mounted him and took control of all of him for all of her, absorbed in herself, her eyes closed, gauging the situation in her absolute inner darkness, advancing here, retreating there, correcting her invisible route, trying another, more intense path, another means of proceeding without drowning in the slimy marsh that flowed from her womb, droning like a horsefly as she asked herself questions and answered in her native jargon; where was that something in the shadows that only she knew about and that she longed for just for herself, until she succumbed without waiting for anybody, she fell alone into her abyss with a jubilant explosion of total victory that made the world tremble. (LITTOC, 178).

After a night of spirited lovemaking, “he would wake for no reason in the middle of the night, and the memory of the self-absorbed love of Ausencia Santander was revealed to him for what it was: a pitfall of happiness that he despised and desired at the same time, but from which it was impossible to escape. (ibid).

In *The General in His Labyrinth*, female characters with astounding sexual libido surface once more, most of them married women eager to escape their humdrum existence in the company of their oftentimes lusterless husbands, among them the General’s trusted-friend-cum lover Manuela Saenz who follows the General when he begins his conquests to the different territories of Peru.

Her marriage to the Englishman was no obstacle to their love.



The General named her curator of the archives in order to keep her near him, and this made it easy for them to make love anytime, anywhere, surrounded by the clamor of the wild Amazonian animals that Manuela tamed with her charms. (TGIHL, 151).

Another such character is Francisca Zubiaga de Gamarra, a spirited woman of action married to a field marshal who would later be President of the Republic.

In between his duties as a political figure, the General found solace in the arms of women, most of whom driven to sleep with him because of love and also because of the attraction of his rank. The ecstatic feeling he found in these encounters were sometimes provided by adoring women "he found along the way." Among his conquests was Manuelita Madrono, "an untamed eighteen-year-old mulatta who sanctified his bouts of insomnia." (TGIHL, 150).

### **Woman as Nurturer and Ally**

Marquez portrays women with the nobility of character so necessary in order to carry out their role of nurturers. *In The General in His Labyrinth*, Marquez assigns this role to Manuela, the General's lover-cum-trusted ally. But hers is more than just the role of the traditional assistant who goes out of her way to make the General's life a lot easier. Manuela in fact transcends her role, thereby elevating duty to its most noble form.

In addition to being the last woman with whom the General maintained a long-term liaison after the death of his wife, twenty-seven years earlier, she was also his confidante, the guardian of his archives, his most impassioned reader, and a member of his staff with the rank of colonel. (TGIHL, 24).

Earlier in his political career, the General had accorded Manuela certain privileges that allowed her to come and go as

she pleased to La Magdalena with military honors. She was his ally in every way, to whom he would entrust important artifacts just before his death. That a man of his stature should bequeath such important documents to her instead of his male steward, the ubiquitous and ever loyal Jose Palacios, is an indication of the General's abiding trust in her.

As always, she would remain behind, charged with keeping the General informed of everything that happened in his absence, since for some time he had trusted no one but her. (TGIHL, 6).

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the image of the nurturer/ally is once more reinforced. When the Buendia family is afflicted with insomnia, it is Ursula who tries to salve their affliction, despite the fatalistic conviction uttered by the Indian that "once it gets into the house, no one can escape the plague" (OHYOS, 49).

"Ursula, who had learned from her mother the medicinal value of plants, prepared and made them all drink a brew of monkshood. . ." (ibid)

In the same novel, the same character is instrumental in the prosperity of the clan. It is Ursula who gives her unwavering support in building the family enterprise. She works her fingers to the bone "in spite of time, of the superimposed periods of mourning, and her accumulated afflictions." (OHYOS, 161)

Ursula resisted growing old. Aided by Santa Sofia de la Piedad, she gave a new drive to her pastry business and in a few years not only recovered the fortune that her son had spent in the war, but she once more stuffed with pure gold the gourds buried in the bedroom. (ibid).

In *Love in the time of Cholera*, when Florentino Ariza learns that Fermina Daza was marrying an illustrious physician, it is his mother, Transito Ariza, who gives him the nurturing he needs

to raise him from his prostration and bring him back to the world of the living.

Transito Ariza did all she could and more, using all the stratagems of a sweetheart to console him when she realized that he had lost his speech and his appetite and was spending nights on end in constant weeping, and by the end of the week he was eating again. Then she spoke to Don Leo XII Loayza, the only one of the three brothers who was still alive, and without telling him the reason, she pleaded with him to give his nephew any job at all in the navigation company. . .” (LITTOC, 137)

Marquez offers his notion of the woman as an ally in the character of Leona Cassini, Florentino Ariza’s personal assistant who displays wit, steadfastness and intelligence. She was Florentino Ariza’s match in every way.

Leona Cassiani had a diabolical talent for handling secrets, and she always knew how to be where she had to be at the right time. She was dynamic and quiet, with a wise sweetness. But when it was indispensable she would, with sorrow in her heart, give free rein to a character of solid iron. However, she never did that for herself. Her only objective was to clear the ladder at any cost, with blood if necessary, so that Florentino Ariza could move up to the position he had proposed for himself without calculating his own strength very well. She would have done this in any event, of course, because she had an indomitable will to power, but the truth was that she did it consciously, out of simple gratitude. (LITTOC, 186)

### **The Empowered Woman**

Marquez imbues his female characters with a strength of character so crucial in the choices they make. Some of his characters have enough an audacity to find their way out of a loveless marriage, if they decide to, and start anew with men they love. This is exemplified by Manuela Saenz in *The General in His Labyrinth*.

After her return from Quito, Manuela decided to leave her husband, whom she described as an insipid Englishman without pleasure, conversed without wit, walked without haste, greeted people with bows, sat down and stood up with caution, and did not laugh even at his own jokes. . .” (TGIHL, 152)

And although Manuela defers her plans to leave her husband due largely to the General’s prodding, she conducts herself as though she was in fact a divorced woman, remaining uncompromisingly loyal to the General until his demise.

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Ursula is depicted as a strong matriarch who wields considerable power in the Buendia household. Even when she was doing menial chores, she did so with the conviction that it was her share in the prospering of their household. Much of her power emanated from her almost brute-like physical strength.

Ursula’s capacity for work was the same as that of her husband. Active, small, severe, that woman of unbreakable nerves who at no moment in her life had been heard to sing seemed to be everywhere, from dawn until quite late at night, always pursued by the soft whispering of her stiff, starched petticoats. Thanks to her the floors of tamped earth, the unwhitewashed mud walls, the rustic, wooden furniture they had built themselves were always clean, and the old chests where they kept their clothes exhaled the warm smell of basil. (OHYOS, 9)

A more dramatic literary figure in *Love in the Time of Cholera* is Fermina Daza, with her stunning beauty and self-possessed ways, whose eccentric behavior distinguishes her from the other women in the novel. Fermina Daza is not just wife to a prominent doctor, she is also an accomplished matron of the arts, who performs a crucial role in the Fifth Poetic Festival. Despite their semblance of a happy life however, she discovers at one point that her husband has been carrying on an affair with a black woman.

Her persona is the wronged wife, symbolic of the plight of most 21<sup>st</sup> century women whose husbands cheat on them and who seek redress for all the pain by finding another chance to be happy. She represents the persona who sees with clear-eyes her traditional role, characterized by devotion and self-sacrifice, but with a more discerning view of what she ought to be: empowered to find happiness, at whatever cost. While she acknowledges with pride and a certain degree of resignation her duty in fulfilling her traditional roles (wife, daughter, mother) she also questions the traditional framework which leaves her at times physically and psychologically battered.

Her decision to travel and leave her philandering husband is not only her own way of getting back at him, but is also a signal that she won't take his philandering sitting down.

Fermina Daza sailed away on the regular boat to San Juan de la Cienaga with only one trunk, in the company of her goddaughter, her face covered by a mantilla to avoid questions for herself and her husband. . . Her husband had no doubts that she would come home as soon as she got over her rage. But she left certain that her rage would never end. (LITTOC,251)

## Conclusion

Marquez has written of war and pain, betrayal, treachery and politics with the conviction that these seemingly monumental issues are no less important than the domestic stories embedded in his novels. At a deeper level, he seems to be saying that politics, economics and social issues are not matters outside of women's turf. On the contrary, their lives are deeply ingrained in these scenarios as they carry out their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, or just ordinary women finding their niche in an ever-evolving society.

Given the circumstances into which these female characters are thrust into, Marquez' characters are oftentimes made to wage a war with their own limitations in order to survive. In a semi-feudal patriarchal setup such as the one depicted in Marquez' novels, women, because of the traditional roles and values forced on them like their Filipino counterparts, have had to battle with the oftentimes harsh social prohibitions in various aspects of their lives. True, some of the characters have been given stereotypical roles, but these same women transcended these roles by going a step higher in the patriarchal matrix. For instance, in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, women were depicted as being partly dependent on their men for material support; however, when wronged, they had no qualms about severing their ties with their men even if it meant being cut-off from their financial subsistence. Fermina Daza made a strong statement to this effect when she walked out on her husband, Dr. Juvenal Urbino the day she found out about his unfaithfulness. Another character in *The General in His Labyrinth*, the indomitable Manuela Saenz has proven that even while she wished to be by the ailing General's side, she could live by herself in perfect solitude.

Se had earlier set out on the journey to Santa Marta to see the General, but when she was told "that she was a whole lifetime too late,"

She sank into her own shadows, her only obligation the two chests of the General's papers that she managed to hide in a safe place in Santa Fe de Bogota. . . Manuela submitted to her fate with festering dignity, first in Jamaica and then in a dismal pilgrimage that would end in Paita, a sordid port on the Pacific where whaling ships from all the oceans came to anchor. There she endured oblivion with embroideries, mule drivers' cigars, and little candies, which she made and sold to sailors for as long as the arthritis in her hands, allowed. (TGIHL, 261)

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Ursula, who by then has become partially blind, retains much of her feistiness even after Colonel Aureliano Buendía's death, proof that her will to survive does not rest on him alone. "The spirit of her invincible heart guided her through the shadows. (OHYOS, 359)

Far from reinforcing delusions, particularly in relation to female sexuality, Marquez' novels have depicted women who may have unbridled sexual passion, yes, but who engaged in the sexual act in a way that doesn't debase their human worth because despite the taboos that they may have violated, they have done so with the purest of intentions, which is love, as in the case of the married women escaping their loveless existence.

In the three novels, as in a number of his other short stories, Marquez manifests an awareness of and a deep interest in the mysterious power of women. He seems to be saying that the potency of a woman's power not only lies in her elemental sexual nature, but in her intellect which mirrors her innermost thoughts and desires.

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