

Violence in Postcolonial Nations is a Colonial Legacy: A Study of Garcia Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel*.

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Colonialism, the most complex and traumatic relationship in human history, has left its mark on international relations, the social relationships within nations and the ideologies of all the peoples of the world. The collective memories that members of the formerly colonized and the formerly colonizing countries hold about the colonial times, and particularly about colonial violence, still permeate their current relationships. On the one hand, these memories certainly weigh on diplomatic contacts between the formerly colonized countries and their former colonizers. On the other hand, they also undermine the inter-group relationships within societies or nations. This violent past also has enduring consequences on the former colonized people's wellbeing. The way this violent past is collectively remembered today, is therefore a crucial factor for understanding the contemporary instances of inter-group conflict, prejudice, stigmatization, and racism.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Colombian author of more than fifteen highly acclaimed books, is a Nobel laureate, master of Magical Realism, and one of the most widely read and critically acclaimed contemporary authors in the world today. From an early age, Garcia Marquez was aware of the political history and violence in his country; Colombia, like most Latin American countries, possesses a complicated, exhausting history of civil wars, dictators, coups d'état, and social revolutions. He is worried that the violence in his land mars the development of the country. He feels that the violence has been systematically cultivated in Colombia by the colonizers and the people should make a conscious effort to stop this kind of violence to make their nation march forward in the direction of development. In *No One Writes to the Colonel*, at a microcosmic level, he points out the violence of the indigenous rulers on an individual and the pathetic state of affairs of the nation.

The culture of violence in Colombia, has its roots in the Spanish colonial rule. The state has become synonymous with violence, because of the attitude of the colonizers towards the subjects of Colombia. Like any other colony, Colombia was also subjected to the dictum of 'divide and rule' by the colonizers. Attacking the weak is the most common form of violence. Colonizers perceive the native people as vulnerable and target them as the centre of their violence. For them, the natives are child-like, primitive and lacking in intelligence, morality and emotional control. This 'colonial mind' continues even after independence, and the new indigenous regime continues to oppress the weak. In Colombia, if the weak belong to the enemy camp, the oppression is double-fold. In a state of martial law, the weak do not have much to say. This statement holds true in the novel, *No One Writes to the Colonel*. It discusses the political climate of one man, the Colonel, who after fighting to create the government in power is being

controlled by the bureaucracy. A corrupt government can ruin a man, sap his will, and drive him mindless with hunger; although the times are hard, the Colonel keeps his dignity and pride. He represents all those who suffer under the military regime. He does not have a name, which shows that everyone who is oppressed is a Colonel himself. The background of *No One Writes to the Colonel* is *La Violencia* and the Colonel's problems stem from being the member of the losing party in the civil war.

The government, through the use of martial law, controls the people quite readily. The government maintains itself through the “Big-Brother” tactics, that include the use of censors, the secret police, and ordinances like “TALKING POLITICS FORBIDDEN” (Penaranda 290). The sweeping control that is present under this martial law, is evident in the every day life of the Colonel and the people of his town. The first example of the nature of their lives is shown through the funeral. A poor musician has died of natural causes; the funeral is supposed to pass in front of the police barracks. But it is stopped by the mayor, who is all powerful when the state is put under the martial law. Though the dead man is a poor musician and the death procession is not a procession of any revolution, it is not allowed to pass in front of the police barracks and the cortege has to change the direction. Even a poor dead man's freedom is curbed when the state is under the curfew.

Garcia Marquez's subtle way of presenting the violent oppression of the regime is evident throughout this novel. The Colonel and his asthmatic wife are living their day-to-day life as best as they can. The Colonel is entitled to get a pension. Every week he heads to the post office in the hope that there will be a letter for him, bringing the pension that he expects. But he has been waiting for more than fifteen years and no letter has ever arrived or looks likely to, but he stumbles on with optimism:

The following Friday he went down to the launches again. And, as on every Friday, he returned home without the longed-for letter. ‘We’ve waited long enough’, his wife told him that night. ‘One must have the patience of an ox, as you do, to wait for a letter for fifteen years’. The colonel got into his hammock to read the newspapers”. ‘We have to wait our turn,’ he said. ‘Our number is 1823.’ ‘Since we’ve been waiting, that number has come up twice in the lottery,’ his wife replied. (23)

The long wait during *La Violencia* has almost driven the Colonel to the point of poverty. Violence, which is present in the atmosphere of the novel, echoes through the life of the colonel. The poor Colonel is not able to fight against this invisible violence. Life becomes hard for him. He has to struggle even for a mug of coffee, every day.

The colonel took the top off the coffee can and saw that there was only one little spoonful left. He removed the pot from the fire, poured half the water onto the earthen floor, and scraped the inside of the can with a knife until the last scrapings of the ground coffee, mixed with bits of rust, fell into the pot. (1)

The Colonel makes coffee and gives it to his asthmatic wife, lying that there is still enough coffee powder left in the can. He doesn't have a mirror for a long time. “After shaving himself by touch-since he'd lacked a mirror for a long time-the colonel dressed silently” (4). In the words of his wife, the Colonel and his wife are ‘rotting alive’ in the military regime. They live at the edge of the town, in a house with a palm-thatched roof and walls whose whitewash is flaking off. The house leaks during the rainy season. This symbolic economic decadence during *La Violencia* is

evident as Garcia Marquez mentions the same kind of economic decadence in one of his short stories, "One of these Days". The story depicts with sheer realism the bitter social and economic consequences of this turmoil. Without mentioning any political parties, Marquez presents two ideological antagonists, a dentist and a patient, who happens to be the Mayor, a representative of the oppressive regime. The dentist, who presumably is one of the people, is sympathetically portrayed. He is an early riser, and a man dedicated to his job, although he is preoccupied with matters other than his work. He seems to be fearless, because the mayor's death threats have no effect upon his determined attitude. On the other hand, the Mayor is seen as a violent man and, in one sentence, the writer communicates that barbarism was the style of the times: "He says if you don't take out his tooth, he will shoot you" (108). Thus the short story not only portrays social erosion in this nameless town, but also reveals the economic decadence of the entire community, through metonymical devices. The poor dentist's office with "the crumbling ceiling and a dusty spider web with spider's eggs and dead insects (110) and two pensive buzzards on the house next door, point to the material stagnation of the community. It is evident from these incidents that *La Violencia* has brought this town to economic prostration.

During *La Violencia*, the crude and the cunning flourished at the cost of the poor and the ignorant. In *No One Writes to the Colonel*, Sabas is a character, who gets prosperous by cheating the innocent and the vulnerable. While everyone lives in poverty, Sabas lives in a "a new building, two stories high, with wrought-iron window gratings" (9). He has a secret understanding with the Mayor and pretends himself to be a patriot. He is Agustin's godfather and a total contrast to the colonel. Agustin, the only son of the colonel, was killed for distributing clandestine literature against the military regime. Don Sabas is a corrupt businessman who will siphon off money from any source or person without blinking an eye. Although everyone knows that he is a traitor and has accumulated wealth through illegal means, they also know that corruption is so widespread that to take on Sabas may actually create more political repression. Callous, mean, obese and a thorough product of *La Violencia*, he is not above cheating the colonel, his godchild's father. He knows the predicament of the colonel. He also knows the worth of the Colonel's rooster. He is aware that Colonel would never part with it; he keeps the rooster in remembrance of his son, Agustin. But Sabas tempts the colonel by offering a good price of nine hundred pesos for the rooster. After much discussion with his wife, the colonel decides to sell the rooster to Sabas. When the colonel takes the rooster to Sabas, he treats the colonel with a kind of contempt and indifference. At the end he offers to buy the rooster only for four hundred pesos. He tries to exploit the poor situation of the colonel. The doctor's words clearly explain the evil nature of people like Sabas during *La Violencia*: "The only animal who feeds on human flesh is Sabas." the doctor said. 'I'm sure he'd resell the rooster for the nine hundred pesos'"(55). *La Violencia* has made him so selfish and ruthless that he never shows compassion to anyone. "Don't be so naïve," he said. Sabas is much more interested in money than in his own skin" (55). Such characters flourished during *La Violencia*, feeding on the blood of the poor people. Garcia's hatred for such people is evident, as he presents such a character even in his short story "Montiel's Widow". Jose Montiel is a despicable character and a product of *La Violencia*. Right from the first sentence of the story, the whole community is contemptuous towards him. "everyone felt avenged except his widow" (147). People are not able to believe that this shrewd individual is dead because he is capable of "playing dead"(147). What makes his death more

incredible is that he dies of natural causes and “not shot in the back in an ambush” (148). Jose Montiel has made his immense fortune by causing the expulsion of those who owned property and by acquiring their land at prices set by him, which was a common practice during the worse years of *La Violencia*. He is the informant to the Mayor who has come to the town to eradicate the opposition and as the narrator explains, Montiel “segregated his enemies into rich and poor. The police shot down the poor in the public square. The rich were given a period of twenty four hours to get out of the town” (151). After Montiel’s death, the community retaliates by boycotting his family’s business and their fortune rapidly begins to deteriorate. Montiel’s children are sent to Europe and although their mother is in a precarious situation, they refuse to return to Colombia. His son, who is in a consular post in Germany, fears that he would be shot if he returns home. His daughters are in France. They claim that they would like to continue to live in a country where there is civilization. In the letters to their mother, they reveal that “It’s impossible to live in a country so savage that people are killed for political reasons” (153). Through the characters of Sabas and Montiel, Garcia Marquez focuses on the inhuman nature of the Colombians who exploit their own countrymen. Exploitation is a phenomenon practised by the colonizers. They do not show any mercy to the colonized and, in a selfish manner, they exploited both man and material of the colonized country. They show their allegiance to their mother-nation and they exploited inhumanly the country they have forcibly occupied. This phenomenon continues even after the colonizers leave the country. The local leaders wear the robe of the Europeans and continue to exploit their own countrymen. The native leaders become selfish in their attitude sacrificing the interests of the nation. They ruthlessly oppress their own people in order to accumulate more wealth. They do not bother about the welfare of the nation or its people. The legacy of the colonizers continues even after the independence in most of the colonized countries. In Colombia, it was evident especially during *La Violencia*.

Garcia Marquez wants the colonized nations to understand that the violence in their lands is the legacy left by the colonizers. They should realize that it is the violence that mars the growth of the colonized nations into becoming formidable powers. They should know that it is a ploy by the colonizer to make the colonized nations powerless. Garcia Marquez exhorts the colonized people to avoid violence, get united, live together and work hard in order to make their nations a power to reckon with.

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