



**Name: Caleb Wern Shih Loh**

**Class: Sec 3H1**

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**Title: A Postcolonial Examination of Magical Realism in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967).**

## **1. Introductory Chapter**

### **1.1. Background**

Gabriel García Márquez (hereinafter referred to as Márquez) is a Colombian writer often hailed as one of the most prolific writers in the Spanish language and was awarded the Nobel Literature Prize in 1982. Of his works, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is his most popular and critically acclaimed work, having sold over 30 million copies worldwide. To a large extent, these works focus on the themes of love, loneliness and aging, but they also contain allegories and allusions to Colombia's rich colonial history.

The Nobel Foundation's nomination of Márquez praised him for "his novels and short stories, in which the fantastic and the realistic are combined in a richly composed world of imagination, reflecting a continent's life and conflicts." His use of so-called "magical realism" has led to a consistent interest in his works since his publication. Broadly understood as a genre which "combines real-world settings and magic or supernatural elements", it is succinctly described by Matthew Strecher as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe" (Strecher, 1999).

In this paper, I plan to focus on his literary style not as an independent facet of his work, but rather to bring about the themes which one would associate with postcolonial theory; namely, the notions of how he challenges Western narratives and portrays subjugation under the colonisers.

### **1.2. Rationale**

Márquez's critical acclaim has often been attributed to his ability to critique the effects of colonialism in his works, establishing his importance in the postcolonial literary canon. On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*'s publication, *The Guardian* had this to say:

"Much of the book is similarly grounded in politics and history, and other kinds of truths. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* offers plenty of reflections on loneliness and the passing of time. It can also be seen as a caustic commentary on the evils of war, or a warm appreciation of familial bonds. García Márquez has urgent things to say that still

feel close to home, here on the other side of the world, 50 years after the book was first published.”

This quote demonstrates that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an important text which has literary and historical significance. It is evident that it is a novel which discusses issues such as war and family on the grounds of politics and history, ergo establishing a clear relation to postcolonial theory.

### 1.3. Research Questions

- i. What postcolonial theoretical perspectives are Gabriel Garcia Márquez exploring in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with regard to challenging dominant Western narratives and cultural imperialism?
- ii. To what extent has Márquez style of magical realism been effective in elucidating these perspectives?

### 1.4. Thesis Statement

Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* reflects the history of Colombia and draws attention to the issues of colonialism and neo-colonialism in his country, both in the economic and the socio-cultural realms. He uses magical realism as a literary tool to signify resistance to central assimilation and to create the perception of “living along the margins” in his work.

### 1.5. Scope of Research / Delimitation(s)

Research conducted will be limited to Márquez's most popular and prominent work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* deals with many postcolonial thematic concerns and events, including historical allegories such as the Banana Massacre, and thus offers rich grounds for deconstruction. This book was also selected as it is widely considered by critics as his *magnum opus* and will be able to reflect themes common throughout Márquez's extensive oeuvre of literary achievements.

### 1.6. Significance of Research / Usefulness

While there has been much scholarship on Márquez's texts, most of the coverage has focused primarily on his unique literary technique, namely the use of magical realism per se, and his personal voice as opposed to the social issues referenced in his work. Relatively little attention has been devoted to how the style of his work ties in with his social commentary. Some of his discussion on issues such as familial ties and kinship, as well as the relations between various ethnic groups and how they share their space despite their differences, have been under-analysed in existing literature. Therefore, this paper aims to meaningfully contribute to this perceived lack in the repository of analysis in this field.

### 1.7. Limitation(s)

This paper is limited to the translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gregory Rabassa. While Márquez had previously declared Rabassa's translation as “superior to the original,” it would be a mendacity to claim that the essence of the book would be completely unaltered

during translation. Another limitation is that this paper is limited to only one of Márquez's works, and ergo it might not be completely representative of his oeuvre. Thus, the conclusions of this paper might not be a completely accurate analysis of Márquez's works.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Colonialism

Colonialism is broadly defined as “a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another.” As is often pointed out, colonialism is closely linked to imperialism, though etymologically the difference is that imperialism focuses on “the way that one country exercises power over another,” while colonialism refers to the “transfer of population to a new territory, where the arrivals lived as permanent residents while maintaining allegiance to their country of origin” (Stamford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017).

In practice, colonialism usually adopts one or a combination of the following three main forms:

- Settler colonisation, where local peoples were numerically outnumbered by settlers and forcibly moved to other areas or exterminated;
- Dependency colonisation, where colonisers arrived at a numerically small number to administer over sizeable local populations;
- Plantation colonisation, where colonisers imported slaves, usually of African origin, to colonies where they often outnumbered their owners (Baird, 2008).

It is also important to understand the concept of neo-colonialism for the context of this paper. Neo-colonialism is roughly defined as “the economic and political policies by which a great power indirectly maintains or extends its influence over other areas or people” (Nkrumah, 1965). While the term was only first recorded in 1961, it was observed in South America long before the term came into use. Neo-colonialism is closely associated with capitalism and transnational corporations, which are often accused as mechanisms of financial oppression (Nkrumah, 1965).

### 2.2. Postcolonial Criticism

While there is no academic consensus on the definition of postcolonial literary theory, it is generally accepted as the study of the “effects of colonial representation in literary texts” (Cuddon, 2013). In general, postcolonial critics are concerned with the relationship between colonialism and gender and class and examine how colonialism affects the colonising nations, and challenge how colonialists constructed colonised regions and peoples as inferior. Additionally, it attempts to empower postcolonial subjects by offering them a voice and avenue by which to express their political positions, which have largely been marginalised from the Western canon.

#### 2.2.1. New Historicism

To comprehensively understand postcolonial theory, it is important to understand its closely related theory of New Historicism. New Historicism is described as “the interpretation of literature as the social, political, and historical milieu that produced it” (Belsey, 2002). New Historicists seek to “situate artistic texts both as products of a historical context and as the means to understand cultural and intellectual history” (The Poetry Foundation, n.d.). Thus, the New Historicist approach facilitates a reconstruction of the ideological influences on society within literature. This is in many ways similar to postcolonial theory, since both of them focus on the constructs of power which reflect themselves in literature. While this is not

directly relevant to my later discussion, new historicism does underpin many other facets of postcolonial theory.

### **2.2.2. Capitalism**

One key focus of postcolonial theory is capitalism. Christine Sylvester describes “imperialism as tied to the unfolding of colonialism” and postcolonial theory as “linking imperialism and agency to discourse and the politics of representation” (Kapoor, 2002). Economic exploitation premised on capitalism, such as the unjust utilisation of human labour and natural resources, is also a concern of postcolonial theory.

### **2.2.3. Orientalism**

Another significant aspect of postcolonial theory is orientalism. In large pioneered by Edward Said, orientalism critiques literature in the Western canon for their inaccurate representations of non-Western peoples and cultures. Said posits that “Western knowledge of the Eastern world” fictionally depicts the East and West as a binary, with the East depicted as irrational and psychologically weak, while the West as rational and psychologically strong (Said, 1978). While this work is ground-breaking, its relevance to the discussion of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is not as relevant given that this was written from the non-colonial perspective. However, orientalism informs and underpins many other aspects of postcolonial theory that were discussed earlier. Major theorists, including Said, indicate that postcolonial work should often be interpreted in relation to orientalism, noting that postcolonial literature often serves as a direct response to the Eurocentric narrative constructed by the West.

### **2.2.4. Cultural Imperialism**

Building on Said’s work, Gayatri Spivak’s work interrogates “the politics of culture from a marginal perspective” (Spivak, 1990). Notably, she is deeply linked to the feminist and Marxist theories as well and has tried to draw links between the various disciplines. This establishes postcolonial theory as we know it in a wider societal context. As such, postcolonial literature is viewed as a response to the wider Western narrative, challenging perceptions about so-called “backward non-Western cultures” (Spivak, 1990).

In a similar vein, cultural imperialism is another important part of postcolonial criticism that has invited huge discussion. Cultural imperialism builds itself on Said’s orientalist framework, suggesting that a fixed Western mindset of what is right and wrong forces the culturally oppressed to subjugate themselves under the same metric. Defined as the “imposition of political ideologies and cultural values upon a subject state,” (Said, 1993) cultural imperialism was criticised by Said who was informed by the works of Noam Chomsky and Michael Foucault. Said proposes that despite the end of the colonial era, colonial legacies continue to influence systems of power.

## **2.3 Conclusion**

Existing literature on postcolonial theory suggests that many postcolonial works actively seek to challenge Western frameworks and narratives around colonial subjects and shed light on issues such as economic subjugation and cultural imperialism. These problems stem from the imposition of a class structure on colonial subjects, one which enforces the hierarchy of colonies based on racial and financial lines. This paper’s discussion will centre upon how Márquez has elucidated these notions, and will bridge existing literature on the subject by examining how magical realism has been effective in achieving this end.

### 3 Discussion

#### 3.1 On Challenging the Narrative of the West

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Márquez uses frequent allegories to historical events to challenge the Western narrative around those events. One of the most prominent was the massacre of striking plantation workers by the Colombian army in the protection of the American Fruit Company's corporate interests, an event modelled after the Banana Massacre which occurred in Colombia in 1928. In the book, the Colombian army traps all the strikers within the town square and they are all gunned down by the military. During the Banana Massacre, the Colombian army was sent to end a union strike for better working conditions to protect the interests of the United Fruit company after the USA threatened to cut off fruit trade if no military action was taken. Approximately 3,000 workers were killed, a number that Márquez references in his work. It is now commonly cited as a prominent example of corporate neo-colonialism. Prior to the book's publication, the Banana Massacre was framed by the Western media narrative as a "Communist strike with subversive tendencies" and that the strikers posed "insurrectionary threats" (History Channel, n.d.). However, Márquez describes the union leaders as being "peaceful groups" with "great patriotic spirit", and the workers killed as being on a "nightmare trip of the train loaded with corpses traveling toward the sea" (p. 315). These lines show that Márquez is trying to generate sympathy for the workers by legitimising their intentions and focusing on their suffering on the train, challenging the predominant narrative that they are "insurrectionary". Additionally, Márquez writes that "the official version of the incident, repeated a thousand times and mangled out all over the country by every means of communication the government found at hand, was finally accepted: there were no dead, the satisfied workers had gone back to their families and the banana company was suspending all activity until the rains stopped" (p. 315). These events highlight Márquez's opinion that the Western narrative readers knew about the Banana Massacre at the time were socially constructed, thus undermining that very narrative. Márquez also uses these events to criticise the colonially-controlled government, portraying it as a hegemonic organisation seeking to monopolise the truth in favour of corporations.

In the book, the sole survivor of the massacre is José Arcadio Segundo, who had tried to inform others about what had happened. However, he was discredited as "a faker or an imbecile" and "eventually lost his ability to express his experiences in words" (p. 318). This can be interpreted as a comment on how the West imposed its version of reality on the Colombian national consciousness to the point that Colombians accepted that as the true nature of what had happened. Márquez's description of the incident is a cautionary tale that warns readers of how colonial narratives had been responsible for how postcolonial subjects perceived critical events, and in doing so, reconstructs the narrative that has largely been dominated by Western discourse.

In describing the relations between the American settlers and the locals, Márquez also implies that "the blind old woman, contrary to what everyone expected, saw nothing reproachable in Meme's going to the dances and making friends with American girls her own age as long as she kept her strict habits and was not converted to the Protestant religion" (p. 300). The fact that people expect her to condemn Western ideals suggests that there is an expectation for the two peoples to remain separate from one another, and that there is a supposed stigma against individuals who choose to actively interact with members of the

other group. While Meme clearly seems to be breaking away from the established norm by associating with the Americans, the woman making a note to keep to her “strict habits” suggests that there is a prevalent perception that the value system of the West is incompatible with many Latin American ideals. This stems from the still predominant Latin American narrative of family and kinship that existed at the period; while the American West valued individual pursuit over one’s family values, Macondo’s culture valued intergenerational unity and relationships, as evidenced from the long tradition of the Buendia household. In particular, the term “strict habits” suggests that the Americans are not as disciplined and regulated in their behaviour vis-à-vis the people of Macondo, while the woman’s objection towards Protestantism shows doubt of the Americans’ moral values as it directly questions the foundation of their principles. This illustrates that there is a difference in the moral structures of the colonisers and their subjects and how they conduct themselves as a result, which directly questions the narrative the West has propagated about how the colonised were necessarily inferior and therefore needed to be “salvaged” by the West. It shows that there are value systems inherent to both cultures and that the West is unable to accept or consider moral systems on an equal footing as their own.

Márquez’s work also attempts to challenge the Western caricature of Latin America as savage peoples. In the context of Western literature and popular culture, Latin Americans have historically been portrayed as “lazy, passive, irresponsible, and, somewhat paradoxically, lustful, animalistic and violent” (Cruz, 1994). Márquez, meanwhile, presents them as peoples with culture and having scientific and artistic achievements. In the book, characters are portrayed as “spending interminable hours in the laboratory” (p. 55), highlighting them as peoples educated and interested in scientific endeavours even before the arrival of their colonisers. The homes of the residents in Macondo are described as having “Viennese furniture, the Bohemian crystal, the table service from the Indies Company, the tablecloths from Holland, and a rich variety of lamps and candlesticks, hangings and drapes” (p. 61-62). The various locations from which these items were procured highlight that Macondo was already a highly connected city before the arrival of the West, while the selection of items Márquez presents is meant to portray an image of grandiosity, given that many of them are associated with riches and wealth since they are extremely expensive.

Márquez also targets the Western caricature of gypsies, who play a large role in his work. Since the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the gypsies have been portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative fashion by the West, often as untrustworthy and backward in the context of Western literature and art. Conversely, Márquez depicts them as honest and scientifically adept. From the get-go, the gypsies are portrayed as possessing “new inventions” (p.1) and their leader, Melquíades, is described as an “honest man” (p.2). Márquez also portrays the gypsies as having supernatural knowledge, including the ability to use metal ingots to make “pots, pans, tongs, and braziers tumble down from their places and beams creak from the desperation of nails and screws trying to emerge” (p. 1). These examples show that the gypsies are not a backward people, but in fact have meaningful endeavours for themselves. Here, it is notable that Márquez is attempting to distinguish between different systems of knowledge. While the West is focussed on scientific knowledge and information, the gypsies access knowledge through the supernatural and unexplained phenomena. It is evident that Márquez is validating the gypsies’ system of knowledge as it goes against the colonial narrative about how we should engage in the knowing and ordering of the world.

While Márquez shows that there is an initial rejection towards gypsies by the people of Macondo, they are later shown to be welcomed, with certain residents working with gypsies to realise accomplishments such as building a laboratory. In another example, when Úrsula's son disappears, she thinks that it is because "he has become a gypsy" (p. 48), when in fact he had become a sailor. The fact that Úrsula's first instinct upon the disappearance of her son was to accredit it to the gypsies plays into the Western narrative that gypsies abduct children from villages; however, Márquez later subverts it to present the gypsies as innocent, making the reader cognisant of how the West had constructed the discourse around gypsies in the Western literary canon.

### 3.2 On Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism refers to how postcolonial societies and their systems of power continue to be affected by their colonial pasts and legacies, often in relation to class and gender. In Márquez's work, there is a clear difference between the Macondo which existed before the arrival of colonisers and the Macondo which exists after their departure. Márquez emphasises that the precolonial Macondo used to be pristine and grand, while the postcolonial Macondo is portrayed as dilapidated and poor. For instance, Márquez writes that "in that Macondo forgotten even by the birds, where the dust and the heat had become so strong that it was difficult to breathe, secluded by solitude and love and by the solitude of love in a house where it was almost impossible to sleep because of the noise of the red ants" (p.409). This creates a picture of desolation and suffering, as the diction of words such as "dust", "heat" and "red ants" invoke the image of discomfort. The fact that birds have forgotten Macondo suggests that Macondo has little food or resources left for them to consume. He compares this to the image of Patricia Brown, the daughter of Mr Brown, one of the banana company's key figures, "failing to evoke the image of misery on the beautiful plains of Alabama" (p.410). By juxtaposing the paradoxical images of the economically deprived Macondo and the splendid Alabaman fields, Márquez draws implicit connections between Macondo's colonisation, how the colonisers have benefitted and how the postcolonial society is suffering. He forces the reader to reconcile the fact that an inequity exists despite the end of the colonial era.

Márquez also emphasises that the Americans continue to influence how the people of Macondo view their past through their colonial legacy. He writes that "the calendars going back to the years before the arrival of the banana company" "did not exist except in the imagination" (p. 395). The fact that there is no calendar depicting precolonial years suggests that the past which preceded the arrival of the banana company did not exist, and that authorities want people to forget all memories which do not subscribe to the official state narrative which accredits the banana company for Macondo's success. Instead of existing in recorded history, precolonial events exist in the imagination, inadvertently altering the way individuals discuss and engage with their heritage. This links to a common phenomenon in postcolonial societies, called "the Mandela effect", in which individuals remember something different from what actually happened due to the spreading of false narratives from the state. Márquez uses this example to show how neo-colonialist corporate interests continue to influence the structures of power and shape how postcolonial subjects view their own subjugation.

Márquez also uses a historical allegory to depict the political impacts of colonial rule on Macondo, but more importantly, on Colombia. After independence, Colombia was subjected to a series of political conflicts, as the conservatives and the liberals struggled for absolute power within the political system, which eventually catalysed the infamous War of a Thousand Days. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, these wars become significant and become a part of the historical backdrop against which Macondo is set. The political violence seen throughout Colombian national history is paralleled in the life of Colonel Aureliano, who wars against the treasonous conservatives facilitating the politico-economic power of foreign imperialists in the national affairs of Macondo, representing the opposition towards colonial rule. It is clear that Márquez wishes to highlight the way in which neo-colonial rule changes Macondo, framing his discussion into the context of Colombian history.

### 3.3 On Magical Realism

This section aims to analyse the extent to which Márquez uses his distinctive magical realist style to depict the colonial and postcolonial experiences to his readers. His style has already been analysed *ad infinitum* and is summarised as one which integrates magical or strange happenings into a highly realistic setting. While some of his literary techniques bear little relevance to postcolonial theory, its application is sometimes used to portray the unique experience of subjugation under colonial rule.

One example of this is the plague of insomnia that is experienced by Macondo. A heat wave attacks Macondo, causing men and birds to go wild, and resulting in beasts attacking houses. Later, the town is afflicted by a plague of insomnia, and people need to label things to remember what they are. Eventually, labels are placed in the context in which they are used. Slowly, the names and uses of things become lost in time, until a gypsy comes with the cure for the plague.

The plague can be interpreted as a metaphor for the nature of memory in the context of societies and their interaction with the practice of colonisation. The destruction of memory and social narratives signals the beginning of the transformation of consciousness, and, as this paper has alluded to earlier in the literature review, it is this transformation of structures of consciousness which had allowed colonisers to forward their Eurocentric narratives. The insomnia plague represents a period in which Macondo was innocent and naïve before the arrival of colonisers, just as its cure is the mark of its cyclical return to history out from a fantastic isolation. As the characters learn later in the novel, the consequences of colonisation ultimately cause the downfall of a once majestic Macondo.

In a wider context, however, illusion and fantasy are portrayed as being interspersed with real truth. Instead of interpreting magic and realism as travelling in parallel, Márquez posits that the distinction between the two is an arbitrary one caused by the linear perspective of history readers. As highlighted through the insomnia plague, memory itself is finite and it is possible that our body of mentally recorded knowledge will shrink to a small skeletal form of what it used to be. Márquez suggests that the inability to distinguish between true facts and fiction is responsible for the amnesia of the social consciousness that causes Macondo to forget about the massacre under the banana company. He grounds his theoretical perspective on the fact that colonialism premises itself on the people under it being unaware of their own subjugation and uses magical realism to point out that there is a disjuncture in

reality, which leads individuals to collectively forget events, and more perniciously, their history and identity.

Crucially, the writing style that Márquez employs signifies resistance to central assimilation and creates the perception of 'living along the margins' in his work. Márquez suggests through his use of fantastical imagery that we are not rational actors by choice, but rather because it is a necessary adaptation to a world which is always fantastic and beyond our immediate comprehension. Márquez engages with the new historicist approach, which deals with how histories are socially constructed, suggesting that logic is constantly being imputed in order to make events appear more palatable and conform to our preconceived notions. The chaotic and random world that Márquez constructs suggests that humans are always limited to their own line of vision and are incapable of understanding the subjective truths of other people's lives. This is a radical worldview which informs the experience of a postcolonial reading, because colonialism is a practice that involves domination through the creation of a world that plays by a different set of rules for colonial subjects to unwittingly enter into. Márquez presents the worlds that the colonised and the colonisers live in as being extremely different and suggests that this stems from the different ways they view the world.

The characters of the novel, while acting in a way that we regard to be perfectly human, do not have any violent or surprised reactions to magical or "unhuman" occurrences. When characters "ascend into the sky" or "develop relationships for the consumption of mud", the natural response of Márquez's characters is to idly stand by and not intervene. This suggests a kind of acceptance towards the fate that they are subject to, even if that fate defies all logical lines of thought. The Buendia family's silent tolerance of the tribulations that they encounter is exceptionally similar to the way colonial subjects were treated, where practices openly defying codes of human conduct were consented into. For the Buendias, they were subjected to the relentless misfortunes of their family name; for the colonised, they were pushed into conditions of abject poverty by slavery, economic oppression, and plunder. Despite the greatly disquieting abuses of colonialism, the *de facto* choice was for the people to remain silent often due to coercive forces of the state that acted upon them. In this sense, Macondo is a city consigned to fate the same way colonial peoples were subject to their oppression.

Magical realism, by virtue of distinguishing itself from the realist-dominated Western canon of the time, was already able to set itself aside from other works. By actively subverting reader's expectations and outdoing each extraordinary occurrence with another, Márquez suggests that he is unwilling to place himself alongside or within the context of the Western canon. The "magical" aspect of his work, which is rarely seen in the West and bears closer resemblance to fables and folk tales common in Latin America, suggests that Márquez wants to resist assimilation and prevent himself from being co-opted into the West.

In many ways, magical realism is the only "language" by which Márquez can express his postcolonial theoretical perspectives. A fully realist iteration of his work would fail to capture and convey the unconventionality of life under colonialism. By using magical realism, he implicitly and unequivocally states that his work is about the people at the margins and whose voices have been shut off from popular discourse. Through using a mode of communication so unique to his home continent, Márquez bridges the gap between the reader and the world of the oppressed subjects. Therefore, magical realism inadvertently

redefines the way readers engage with Márquez's postcolonial commentary. More importantly, it gives the postcolonial theoretical perspectives that he expounds a nucleus by portraying life beyond the peripheries of what we consider to be 'objective reality'.

### **Conclusion**

I conclude that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a novel which displays Márquez's postcolonial perspectives in a cogent, persuasive manner through his use of magical realism to portray 'life along the margins'. He attempts to challenge predominant Western narratives and is unafraid to discuss issues such as cultural imperialism and economic oppression in his work.

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