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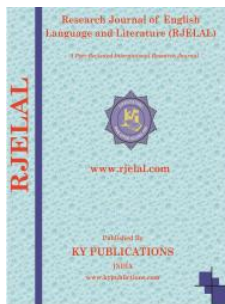
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THE FEMALE HERO IN GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ'S *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE*

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ABSTRACT

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a Colombian writer, is known for popularizing "Magic Realism as a literary style in which he blends myth and history to illustrate his themes and concerns. Marquez is associated with the prominent writers of the "boom" in Latin American literature in the twentieth century. The present paper attempts to examine the heroic journey of Ursula Iguaran in his celebrated novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). In the novel, Marquez shows how a woman displays heroism to forge meaningful relationship between the home and the outside world. Ursula, a matriarch, plays significant role in strengthening and sustaining the Buendia family through seven generations over one hundred years even in the face of dangers and difficulties. Endowed with strong spirit and unyielding will, she stays committed to the cause of human life even risking her life without losing her mental balance, moral fervor and humanistic dimensions. She wages a war against the inhuman forces to create humanistic conditions for better life. She not only influences males in the Buendia family but also shapes the decisions and actions of males in the outside world. Even in the old age, she continues to be dynamic and assertive but her death signals the death of both the family and the town.

Key Words: The Boom, Paradisiacal, Colonialism, Patriarchy, Heroism, Mental Equilibrium

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a Colombian writer, is known for popularizing "Magic realism as a literary style in which he blends myth and history to illustrate his themes and concerns. Marquez is associated with the prominent writers of the "boom" in Latin American literature in the twentieth century. He is widely known for his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). The available criticism on this novel is largely concentrated on such themes as solitude, Incest, political turmoil, modernization *versus* tradition, solitude, magic

realism, alienation and isolation, etc. But the critics fail to appreciate and acknowledge the importance that Marquez attaches to his female characters, especially Ursula Jose Iguaran. A close reading of the novel reveals that the author endows Ursula with heroic qualities typical of both females and males.

The present paper attempts to examine the various aspects of *Ursula* José Iguarán's personality as presented by Marquez's in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Primarily, the novel represents the story of the Buendia family through seven generations over

the period of one hundred years. In broader terms, the novel chronicles the history of Colombia since its liberation from the colonial yoke of Spain in 1810. Besides, the novel can also be read as "a narrative about the myths of Latin American history" (Martin 97). The novelist uses the history of the Buendia family as well as the fictional town of Macondo to illustrate the history of Colombia and by extension the history of Latin America. We find many parallels between the history of the Buendia family and the turbulent history of Latin America. "The story of Buendia family is obviously a metaphor of the continent since its independence" (Martin 97). Macondo is used as microcosm of Latin America as well as the Universe. As Gullon Ricardo observes, "The Buendia house and the city of Macondo are representations of a vast universe where everything has its proper place, including time" (Gullon 28).

Initially, the town of Macondo grows as a tiny settlement with the paradisiacal beauty and purity, isolated from the rest of the world. With the time, the town turns into a prosperous place as it comes into contact with the outside world, but the outer influence in the long-run leads to its downfall. In the historical evolution of the town, though Ursula plays a significant role, her husband takes all the credits in his name behind this creation thereby disregarding the significant contribution of Ursula to the construction of Macondo. The author portrays her with heroic deeds in the prolonged course of life hitherto unknown and unappreciated in the history of Latin America. The more she lives, the more the town flourishes, the more she suffers, the more she fights. But when she dies, the town also meets its tragic end.

In the beginning, Ursula seems to be obedient and faithful wife in the way she goes by each every wishes and whims of her husband, Joe Arcadio Buendia. She does not bother about his relationships with her in day-to day life, except wasting money on strange equipments and experiments. In the early phase of her marital life, she is shown as a victim as her husband rapes her at the spear point to save his honour by proving his masculinity in the eyes of other males of the town. Going by the mythic view that a baby with pig tail will be born out of the incestuous relations, as they

are close cousins, she wears a 'chastity belt' to avoid sexual relations with her husband. The name Ursula is derived from the Greek word 'ursus' meaning 'bear' seems to be suggesting her nature and temperament. The word 'bear' can be used on two levels: the first, it shows her as a woman of patience and the second, presented as strong and as isolated as a bear is.

Ursula, as a co-founder of Macondo, plays a heroic role in the rise of the town even in the face of colonialism, patriarchy and natural calamities. In her various roles---as founder of the town, as wife, as mother, as grandmother and as counsel---she stays committed to the cause of community or humanity up to the last moment of her life. She often transcends the stereotypical gender boundaries for the sake of well-being and welfare of the members of her family and the town. In the traditional Latin American society, women are considered as objects to satiate man's carnal desires. The common feature of the Latin American women is "in the eye, and the hand, and the power, of the beholder" (Haslanger 226).

In the conventional Latin American society, women are confined to the closed world of domesticity and motherhood whereas men are associated with open world of chivalry, masculinity, gallantry and adventurous or aggressive pursuits. Ilan Stavans remarks that the responsibility of Latin American mother is "to ascertain that her sons are raised properly" to make certain they are not "running wild just like donkeys" (97) and she is not expected to share this responsibility with her husband. But the author endows her with both feminine and masculine qualities contrary to what is reflected the contemporary life and literature.

Ursula refuses to be submissive and voiceless wife as she begins to believe in her innate powers and potentialities as a human being. She not only uses her powers and potentialities to nurture the family but also encourages the townsfolk to undertake the same. The author models Ursula on his grandmother who was smart, industrious, spirited, strong-willed, and never lost heart even in the face of adversities and trying circumstances. She had many children and was regarded as the

supreme queen of the whole family. Along the lines of his grandfather the author shapes Ursula to be a mainstay and symbol of stability in contrast with her husband's fighting nature.

Even though Ursula seems to be trapped in the conventional role as wife, she never misses the opportunity that circumstances offer her to show her wisdom and powers in the male domain of adventure outside the home. For example, she goes out in search of her son, Jose Arcadia who runs away with a gypsy girl. Though she fails to locate him even in the long period of six months, she does not feel exhausted and disappointed; rather she emerges as spirited and exalted person. By stepping into the male domain of adventurous performance, she seems to be transcending the traditional gender roles. In her character, the author reveals "a new hegemony that goes beyond an equal distribution of power" (Harvey 143). By subverting the gender roles the author foregrounds how a woman can manage the household and external affairs at the same time without losing her mental equilibrium.

Ursula opposes her husband forcefully when her husband for his obsession with technology and flighty ideas. He intends to move to a new place to start his life anew after a series of failed experiments. When his addiction to strange things assumes threatening dimensions, she gathers "the women of the village against the flightiness of their husbands" (Marquez 17). Further, when he comes out with the strange view that "a person does not belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground," (Marquez 18) she counters his view with the words: "If I have to die for the rest of you to stay here, I will die" (Marquez 18). She is so much attached to the place that she refuses to leave it for the sake of her entire family, even more she is not afraid of death.

Acutely conscious of the ground realities, Ursula goes against her husband for strange schemes and pursuits, and holds her family together for many generations to ward off the pangs of solitude. For disregarding the familial duties and responsibilities she lambasts her husband with the words, "Instead of going around thinking about your crazy inventions, you should be worrying about your

sons...Look at the state they're in" (Marquez 14). It is her forceful personality that compels her husband to pay his attention towards the well-being of children. The author deconstructs the traditional view that only women are responsible for rearing children and men are the only bread winners.

Ursula, as a female custodian of the Beundia family, tries to foster the sense of solidarity among the inhabitants of Macondo when she comes to know that there is a tendency of "anti-solidarity even among people who sleep in the same bed" (Guibert 314). Even at the cost of her personal comforts and concerns, she comes forward to protect the family and the town from the cancer of solitude that is eating into the very vitals of human life in the town of Macondo. Besides, she tries to ward off incestuous relations in a world increasingly threatened by chaos and "her quest for permanence and stability is underscored by her acute awareness of the cyclical nature of time" (McMurray 77). The author keeps the view that the "disaster of Macondo", results from the lack of solidarity--the solitude which results when everyone is acting for himself alone" (Guibert 314).

Moreover, alike her husband, Ursula does not give in to illusions and false beliefs, clinging to the ground reality. She grows vegetables, raises livestock and develops her own marvelous business of "candied little roosters and fish" (Marquez 43). In this respect, Meredith Harvey remarks aptly, "Ursula becomes an all-powerful matriarch who financially supports the family through practical and hard work" (143). Besides, she enlarges the house to cater to the needs of the large family. She knows the fact "that her children were on the point of marriage and having children and that they would be obliged to scatter for the lack of space" (Marquez 51). To facilitate the life in Macondo she succeeds in creating such an atmosphere where all sorts of meaningful activities and events could take place peacefully.

The novelist subverts the normative gender roles by creating Ursula as a bread winner and confining her husband to the home. Tut to some critics, she ceases to be a nurturing mother by entering the male domain of performance. Busy

with her concerns in the outside world, she leaves her grandson Arcadio and her daughter in the custody and care of the Indian woman, Guajiro. Later, she raises a child, as a descendant of the family, out of her will to "shape the virtuous man who would restore the prestige of the family, a man who would never have heard talk of war, fighting cocks, bad women, or wild undertakings" (Marquez 184). It is obvious that Ursula stays on the both sides of gender dichotomy. She is presented "both a mother and the Mother" (Gullon 28). She is presented both as mother and father alternatively.

Ursula, as a virtual ruler of the town, restores peace, stability and many of the good old customs like the Sunday mass and cancels Arcadio's decrees. "But in spite of her strength, she still wept over her unfortunate fate. She felt so much alone that she sought the useless company of her husband who had been tied to the chestnut tree" (Marquez 93). With the unyielding spirit and iron will, she strives hard to live and keep the Buendia family moving with honour, sanity and respect. When her grandson Arcadio becomes "the cruelest ruler" (Marquez 105) of Macondo and is bent upon persecuting the townspeople and misuses public funds, she keeps him flogging, without displaying any sign of mercy on her face, until he "curls up like a snail in its shell" (106). Finally, she succeeds in releasing the prisoners from his cruel captivity. Ousting him from the throne of Macondo, she becomes an efficient ruler of the town and brings about revolutionary changes in the lives of its inhabitants.

In fact, through her dominant role, Ursula not only influences the decisions and desires of the male characters in her family but also plays a decisive role in shaping the decisions and actions outside the home. When Colonel Aureliano decides to execute the Conservative General, José Raquel Moncada at the end of the civil war, Ursula gathers the mothers of officers to protect the General from being executed, testifying and praising his virtues. Further, she forces Colonel Aureliano to withdraw his orders of execution against his friend Col. Gerineldo, advising him, "Men demand much more than you think. There is a lot of cooking, a lot of sweeping, a lot of suffering over little things beyond

what you think" (Marquez 194). To critics like Edwin Williamson, "Ursula represents an order of taboo mentality. Her taboo regime is repressive and inefficient. (Williamson 52). But the critic fails to perceive the human face hidden behind the façade of repressiveness.

Ursula fights for the cause of humanity against the cruel and relentless forces, risking her life. For example, she does not bother of her life while cleansing Colonel Aureliano's stomach of the deadly poison in his stomach "Ursula embodies the feelings of autochthon in all its complexity" (Gill 150). She nurses her husband when he nears the imminent death. Tenderness of her heart gets reflected in the way she takes care of the sick girls. When Jose Arcadio returns, she welcomes him, saying: "And there was so much of a home for you, my son, and so much food thrown to the hogs" (Marquez 81). With all the tenderness of a grandmother she baptizes the seventeen illegitimate sons of Col. Aureliano.

Ursula acts as a stabilizing force in managing the unruly family of many children and the troubled town. As a matriarch, Ursula is well aware of the cyclical nature of time and feels that time is turning in a circle. Deeply bound to Macondo she is averse to see the town in ruins. At regular intervals, she renovates the house for the sake of permanence and stability of the family even in the face of flow of time. She is an "active, small, severe woman of unbreakable nerves who at no moment in her life had been heard to sing" (Marquez 15). With an immense capacity for work, she keeps the house free of dust and dirt. She is, thus, the personification of endurance and will-power.

Even though Ursula is completely different from the stereotypical women, she does not deviate from the humanistic role as woman. The author recognizes her importance in the way she keeps both the family and town alive for a considerably long time. As the author remarks, "She should have been dead before the Civil War when she was almost one hundred years old. But I found that if she had been dead, the book would be ruined" (Mendoza 98). It indicates that she is a driving force behind the development of the novel and acts as

backbone of the town. As Susanne Kappeler remarks that "Ursula is more like the stem which runs down that entire tree, supporting all its branches" (155).

Even in the old age when she becomes blind from cataract, Ursula does not lose her wisdom, confidence and perceptive or receptive powers, and continues to be dynamic and assertive. She continues to engage herself with the rejuvenation of the house with unthinkable vitality at this age: "There won't be a better, more open house in all the world than this mad house" (Marquez 151). Till death, she keeps struggling to save the family from four calamities that bring about its downfall. Time and again, she warns her sons and grandsons against the ills of war, incest cockfighting and wild pursuits.

When Ursula's role as matriarch declines, misfortunes fall on the family: with her life, the town rises and with her death it dies. The death of the town is signaled by the death of Ursula. The way she plays role in the life of the Buendia family and Macondo signifies the positive and constructive side of her character. Despite being trapped in the conventional role as wife and mother, she uses her wisdom and managerial skills to stabilize and strengthen the family and the town. This implies that she can be more effective in cementing and centring the family if she finds more chances to cross the gender boundaries.

Towards the end of her life or the novel, she is maltreated by the children: "They looked upon her as a big broken down doll that they carried back and forth from one corner to another wrapped in coloured cloth and with her face painted with soot and annatto" (Marquez 266). When she realizes that her house has fallen into a state of ruin, she again tries to restore it. With her unique personality she never loses heart and vitality in the face of dangers and adversities and continues to be the potent and positive voice of the townsfolk.

The representation of Ursula can be perceived as an attempt of the author to center female characters to devise a model of femininity that transgresses everything masculine. Through the character of Ursula, Marquez foregrounds the role of women in the historical process. By doing this the

author not only subverts the official history of Colombia that highlights man's role but also acknowledges and appreciates the significant role that Ursula plays in the historical process of the town.

The foregoing discussion reveals that Ursula emerges as a female hero amidst a large number of male characters. With daunting courage, strong spirit, sense of solidarity, moral fervour, feeling heart, wisdom and vitality, Ursula fights against the anti-life forces to protect and perpetuate human life. Not only she strengthens the Buendia family but also contributes to the historical development of Macondo. She strikes a fine balance between the home and the outside world in the face of heavy odds. Without losing mental equilibrium, sense of solidarity and moral fervour she keeps going on her heroic journey. She stays committed to the cause of human life even risking her life. The Buendia family or the town of Macondo grows and prospers with her life and collapses with her death. The novel underscores the view that woman can go a long way in evolving out a better world order by transcending gender stereotypes.

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