

Cultural Symbols of Latin America in Marquez's Literary Discourse

Mohammad B. Aghaei^{[a]:*}, Safar Hayati^[b]

^[a]Department of English Language, East Azarbaijan Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran.

^[b]Department of Social Science, East Azarbaijan Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This article deals with the cultural aspects of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's literary discourse that are manifested or represented through its narrative units, carrying cultural semantic contents. These units indeed serve as socio-symbolic mediations that relate the literary text to his culture. For this reason, Marquez has immensely applied the figurative elements in his novels, making a bridge between his works and the world to which he belongs or claims to belong. These textual elements can be thus interpreted by taking into consideration the cultural aspects of his society. Hence, this article surveys the cultural components of his novels and mainly to decode them according to the cultural values and social conventions of his culture.

Key words: Figural elements; Conventional symbols; Natural references and cultural codes

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INTRODUCTION

Being sensitive to the uniqueness of the socio-cultural aspects of his country and the complexity of themes that he has intended to present in his novels, Marquez is indeed induced to construct and develop a highly original literary idiom for portraying his society with its distinguishable

cultural features and complicated history; a society that had been a victim of the political oppressions and repressions under the domination of past colonialism and recent imperialism for almost three centuries; a society that has lost its salient cultural traits and identity due to the influence of African and Spanish cultures during the period of colonization; a society that has been controlled by the unfaithful and unreasonable Catholic authorities whose dark and cruel behaviors have condemned many innocents and professional figures to death; a society that has been influenced by the superstitious beliefs of the alien cultures; a society in which moral depravities have been considered as acceptable norms; a society that is composed of multi-racial communities; a society that has been ruled by the inefficient ruling system and the dictatorship without any well-organized government; a society in which violence, insecurity, injustice and poverty form a part of people's life; a society that is male-dominated and where women are considered as an inferior social class and are often exposed to sexual harassment; a society that has isolated the weak but honorable characters from the members of the higher social class due to their poverty; a society that immensely suffers from smuggling, kidnapping and assassination; a society in which the bloody conflicts between the political parties affect the majority and take the life of thousands of people; a society in which the period between the modernity and pre-industrialization is the most critical era in its history. These are some noticeable peculiarities of Latin America's society that make it quite different from the other societies of the world. Therefore, the society with these features impels Marquez to devise a relevant and appropriate literary style for presenting them in his literary discourse, mainly by symbolizing them with the figural devices. For this reason, every ingredient of his literary discourse –such as the names of the characters, their behaviors, thoughts, traits, expressions, allusions, death, and also the settings and events – is wisely but ruefully presented by means of various figural devices, consequently comprising multiple implications.

1. CONVENTIONAL SYMBOLS

In his literary discourse, these figurative elements which are seemingly conventional symbols have popular references to the essential features of Latin American society; in fact, their adequate interpretation significantly contributes to the understanding of the cultural, religious and historical aspects of that area. But, sometimes, some of the symbols leave the reader with his own interpretations since they do not have any specific referent such as the ‘yellow flower’ in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* wherein when Jose Arcadio Buendia dies, the natural world weeps for him with tiny yellow flowers. Although these kinds of unusual literary symbols create difficulty in the interpretation of his literary discourse, he intentionally applies them as a doctrine of mysticism in order to give a shadow of reality to the discourse. Thus, his literary discourse actually presents before the reader a fascinating fictional world in which the existential conditions of his life-world are astutely symbolized and hence the reader has to decipher them by not only analyzing the numerous textual clues of the narrative but also having awareness of Marquez’s past personal life. By applying this kind of literary style, his main intention is in fact to focus the reader’s attention on the important aspects of realities that most often seem to be more real in his fictional narrative than they actually are in reality, as in the case of the foundation of Macondo. He offers the reader a concrete, tangible vivid description that actually in turn possesses more abstract and subtle significance, such as the biblical traits of some characters, namely Vicario brothers, Angela’s father and mother in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*.

Marquez also applies some ‘natural and environmental references’ that are required to be deciphered, such as plagues, flood, rain and various flowers and birds that carry the cultural significance of the Latin American society. For instance, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the plague symbolizes loss of both political and social memories, loss of language and loss of identity. The flood which erases the villagers’ memory is also a reference to Noah’s time. Sometimes, the rain appears as a symbol of hope and sometimes as vital changes and mass destruction. In his novels, Marquez has referred to some flowers such as ‘White rose’ and ‘Camellia flower’ that serve as cultural symbols or codes. The White rose symbolizes innocence and secrecy and is also a symbol of young love. Camellia implies admiration, perfection and loveliness and is also considered as a flower of promise and a good luck gift. In Latin America, the religious rites and the cultural and social ceremonies have been always enriched with flowers since they are conveniently obtainable in tropical climates and add beauty to everything. They are essentially used in weddings and funerals as a part of the customs of Roman Catholics. There are some female characters in the novels whose names refer to flowers and represent the cultural

aspects and the values of Latin America; for instance, ‘Flora Miguel’, who is Santiago Nasar’s fiancée, is also symbolically presented as a beautiful flower in Santiago’s life. ‘Don Rogelio de la Flor’ dies as Santiago is stabbed, indicating her delicacy like a flower. A female character is also called as ‘Rosa’, a beautiful flower, since she is beautiful and delicate too. In fact, their feelings and elegance are symbolized with the delicacy and elegance of flowers. ‘Divina Flors’ name is ironic since she is not at all divine; she is indeed a victim condemned to Santiago’s bed. However, in the novels, the female characters whose names basically refer to flowers were more vulnerable to the cruelty of men. The flowers can also imply the innocence of those people who are killed, for instance, in the social riots or in a crime. In Latin America, the flowers also imply the purity of women. Therefore, virginity is symbolized by the image of a flower such as the bud of virgin. The ‘almond tree’ is also used as a symbol for virginity. A week before his murder, Santiago Nasar had “dreamed that he was alone in a tinfoil airplane and flying through the almond trees without bumping into anything” (1). Trees are culturally recognized as being feminine. This could be a metaphorical representation of Santiago Nasar flying through a grove of virginal Angela Vicario.

Marquez utilizes the ‘Orange blossom’ in the novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* to emphasize Angela’s lie and indecencies. Angela who dared to lay with a man before her marriage dared to marry Bayardo and shamelessly wore the Orange blossoms on her gown. In Latin America, the Orange blossom implies the girl’s purity and chastity that must be held with the highest respect. In ancient China, the Orange blossom was also identified as a symbol of purity. Then this tradition moved westward towards India and up to Iran. Even, in Europe, after many difficult years of fighting in the crusade, many European soldiers brought back with themselves this flower to their young brides. Therefore, in Latin America, the ‘flowers’ have several symbolic implications, such as love, compassion, purity, beauty, delicacy, life, deceit and victimization.

2. STEREOTYPICAL CULTURAL CODES

One of the novels that Marquez has mostly applied the figurative language is *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The words such as ‘flowers’, ‘rain’, ‘bird’, ‘tiger’, ‘cholera’ and ‘white camellia’ carry more associated meanings than their literary meanings. These words give multiple meanings to the text and the reader should be thus equipped with the relevant cultural knowledge in order to be able to decipher them.

In the novel, some flowers serve as an indirect reference to love. Florentino expresses his love and passion for Fermina by sending camellias and roses. Once, in order to express his ever-lasting love for Fermina, he

sends her a white camellia known as ‘flower of promise.’ For this reason, when Fermina returns the camellias that he had sent her, he realizes that she has rejected his marriage proposal. After her rejection, Florentino gets an intense lovesickness that creates more physical problems in his heart and stomach. Then, his physical illness changes into a mental illness, obsession. His obsession is so severe and harsh that brings him near to lose his job as he cannot stop thinking of Fermina for even a moment. Due to this obsession, Florentino ingests the flowers, symbolically ingesting Fermina’s affections “because the flowers are all he can possess of her until they can be together. The flowers, however, make him violently ill, as does his love for Fermina, which brings him intense emotional and physical suffering. Strangely, Florentino seems to enjoy this suffering; when he must spend three nights in a jail cell on account of the violin serenades he plays for Fermina, he feels martyred, and looks upon his torment as a gratifying, strengthening experience. Florentino enjoys the anguish he feels when in love, and induces it when he ingests the flowers, for if he cannot be with Fermina, he must feel something, even if it is pain, to know that he is alive” (Miller, & Perry, 2009).

In most of Marquez’s novels, the ‘rain’ signifies that the important events are going to happen in the story. In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, the rain and weather seem to carry multiple symbolic meanings. For instance, the day of Santiago’s murder, the weather is in unusual condition; some people think that it is nice and others believe that it is going to rain. In *The General in His Labyrinth*, the recurrence of rain is interpreted as one of the purifying rituals that the community must undergo in order to wash away the contagion of violence, as the same happens in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in which the rain ruins all traces of massacre. Thus, the presence of rain predicts a critical turn of events in his novels. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, on the day of Dr. Urbino’s funeral, there is heavy rain that floods the city and ravages it on Pentecost Sunday. Rain and other derivatives of water (rivers, puddles, tears) are frequently represented in the novel as bearers of cleansing and change, whether that change be positive or negative. The immense downpour that floods the city brings about two drastic changes: the death of Dr. Urbino and the reappearance of Florentino in Fermina’s life. Water is referred to again when Transito Ariza finds Florentino asleep whereas drowned victims are ultimately washed ashore, because Florentino is a victim not of the ocean, but of his obsessive love for Fermina, and the self-inflicted suffering he endures because of her.

Throughout the novel, the presence of ‘birds’ always refers to the probability of danger and temptation. The important bird in the novel is Dr. Urbino’s cunning ‘parrot’ which is responsible for his death. The prostitutes at the transient hotel are referred to as birds that are considered a danger to Florentino’s purity. Birds are also a threat to some characters in the novel. For instance, when

Florentino took the letter out of his inside jacket pocket to give to Fermina, “a bird shook himself among the leaves of the almond trees, and his droppings fell right on the embroidery” (61). Florentino gets impressed and this is foreboding of the romance’s ill fate: “He sat down and hounded by the damnable memory of the bird droppings on his first love letter” (304). Another instance is when Lorenzo Daza walked into the entryway, the crows emitted a funeral shriek. Dr. Urbino tells Fermina to beware that “They [crows] will peck out your eyes” (121). In this novel, birds also refer to the ill-mannered women. Sister Franca de la Luz “ordered the novice to wait for her without getting too close to the crows, who in a careless moment might peck out her eyes” (126).

Another point is that Florentino and Fermina start their journey on the boat named ‘New Fidelity’: “Unlike the other riverboats, ancient and modern, *New Fidelity*... was spacious and comfortable” (326). The boat’s name ‘New Fidelity’ signifies the renewed bond of affection and passion between them. Fermina is also excited about travelling aboard the ship with only the bare minimum of her belongings because the journey will provide her with an escape from her home, memories of her dead husband, and his clothes, books, and other belongings. After Florentino has left her ship cabin, Dr. Urbino’s ghost appears to Fermina and tips his hat, she feels appeased and relieved, for her husband’s gesture, whether real or imagined, signifies his final farewell to her, and grants her strength to go on without him, and to continue her affair with Florentino.

Another element carrying an associated meaning is the ‘yellow flag’. When Florentino sees some people at the port, he requests the Captain to raise the yellow flag to announce that there is a case of cholera in the boat so that they maintain a distance from the port since Fermina does not like anybody to see her with Florentino. In this novel, the yellow flag is an indicator of Florentino’s complete surrender to his plague of desire, for, he has finally been consumed by Fermina’s love. It implies that Florentino has surrendered himself to it as a sufferer of cholera would surrender to death.

Near to the end of the story, when Florentino announces that “we have killed the tiger” (259), he refers to his long love for Fermina: “asking himself in terror what he was going to do with the skin of the tiger he had just killed after having resisted its attacks for more than half a century” (284). And also, when Florentino announces that he and Leona Cassiani have ‘killed the tiger’, he implies that they have overcome any remaining sexual tension between them. The ‘tiger’ refers to that tension.

Eventually, the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* is one of Marquez’s works in which he has applied two kinds of parody; the first one is his own life’s parody, the second is the textual parody concerned with the combination of the historical aspects with biblical facts. Like his other works such as *Of Love and Other Demons*,

Chronicle of a Death Foretold and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* based on his own experience, the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* is also based on “his own parents’ love story: Fermina Daza represents Luisa, the writer’s ninety-two-year-old mother, and Florentino Ariza is the telegraphist Gabriel Eligio Garcia, his father, who died at eighty-four” (Hamill, 1988, p.124). Marquez thus uses his own autobiographical facts in order to fictionalize his past in his works and, in this way, make a relationship between himself and them. But, from the textual point, he mainly intends to present the Latin American culture, settings and figures from the biblical point of view. Indeed, the re-creation or reflection of biblical aspects in his novels actually serves as a *code* for giving a sanctifying aspect to the novels, and as a *proof* for emphasizing on the originality of the Bible in the cultural context of the twentieth century.

3. SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF HISPANIC-AMERICAN IDENTITY

Marquez’s novels mainly represent the historical and cultural aspects of his society. One of his novels that basically recount these aspects is *Of Love and Other Demons* that depicts the Hispanic-American aspects of the society in the period of colonialism. Colombia was actually a colony of Spain for three centuries and, consequently, the Spanish culture has influenced in many aspects of the Latin American culture. So the novel *Of Love and Other Demons* indicates how Catholic authorities cruelly behave with Sierva Maria, a twelve-year-old girl, whose mother is originally from African culture and father from Spanish one. Therefore, the novel mainly represents the family heritage and the moral, mental and physical conditions of Sierva Maria; that is, it portrays her from different perspectives. Because of her double cultural background, Sierva Maria stands on an undefined boundary between two worlds; that of the white European on the one hand and of the American black and Indian on the other.

The double cultural background of Sierva Maria is represented in her identity such as her birth, physical appearance, childhood, language, the perception of others towards herself, her condition as a sick person and her family’s cultural background. All these characteristics are associated with Sierva Maria’s identity. About her cultural background, Rodriguez-Vergara says that:

“She is born at the very edge, nearly strangling, premature and unloved, of a Spanish father, with some appearance of mental retardation, and rejected by her mestizo mother. The name, the childhood, and the cultural and geographic environment of this character are also borderline: she alternates her first name in Spanish—no last name—with an African name she has invented for herself, Maria Mandinga, and she is also culturally

double because her environment is Spanish (daughter of the Marquis of Casalduero and of the plebeian Bernarda Cabrera) and African (nursed, reared, and baptized under the guardianship of the Catholic-Yoruba black woman Dominga de Adviento, a symbol of the link between the two worlds). But Sierva Maria recognizes Dominga as her mother and chooses to sleep with the slaves; she dances and speaks several African languages, she wears African clothes and necklaces and celebrates her twelfth birthday with them with fireworks and music. Sierva Maria chooses and constructs her African identity as Maria Mandinga: she speaks the Yoruba language and refuses to learn peninsular Spanish and to read, write, or study arithmetic” (Rodriguez-Vergara, 1998d).

These complicated and mixed identities of Sierva Maria are the main factors causing her to be easily condemned to exorcism. One of them is her social identity because she has a surname as ‘Mandinga’ that indicates non-Spanish culture. It motivates the Catholic authorities who themselves belong to the Spanish culture to consider her as illegitimate although her father has a European identity. Therefore, her surname gives her an African identity, challenging the colonial laws of kinship. Another factor causing Sierva Maria to be mistreated by the Inquisition is that her future is in doubt between sanctity and prostitution. Dominga Sarmiento declares that she will be a saint, and on the other hand, Lord of the Darien asserts that she will be a whore. Another problem with Sierva Maria is her small scar in her ankle caused by a supposedly rabid dog. She is considered an ill omen because of superstitious belief in demonic possession. These conditions put her in a psychic disturbance and cause her to express unusual behaviors. Thus, they get more suspicious about her health problem as they consider it a threat to the predominant cultural order controlled by the Catholic ruling system.

The novel creates a discourse in which two worlds meet each other: The world of the black African which is a result of the slave trade and the world of the Spanish that constitutes the social norms controlling the legal and government institutions. Black culture stresses on black magic and sacrificing animals and the latter emphasizes on the ritual of exorcism and sacrificing of human: “Holy Office [are] happy to break innocents on the rack or burn them alive in public spectacle” (72). Even, Abrenuncio, who is considered as a fully knowledgeable physician by the church, gives a deplorable view about Sierva Maria: He says that the devil has got into her spirit and caused her madness (115). He dares to express his view that killing Sierva Maria would have been more Christian than burying her alive (72). On the other hand, he denies the girl’s supernatural powers such as levitation, divination and sanctity.

However, the only person who is against their view on Sierva Maria’s devil possession is the priest Cayetano

Delaura. As a spiritual authority, he says: "I believe that what seems demonic to us are the customs of the blacks learned by the girl as a consequence of the neglected condition in which her parents kept her" (91). Because of the irrational nature of Spanish cultural attitudes, thirteen hundred medical or related professionals had been sentenced to the different penalties such as persecution by the Inquisition during fifty years of domination of colonialism.

CONCLUSION

Marquez's novels constitute an aesthetically grounded fictional discourse which represents the conventions, values and myths of the society in a symbolic language. It basically displays those aspects that have originated from the historical and cultural realities of his country and Latin America. Its main object is to symbolically fictionalize the social conditions and the events and communities of the continent with the cultural signs. Therefore, every symbolic element in his novels can serve as a figural reference to the realities of Latin America, conveying the connotative meaning. He has also frequently applied the archetypal symbols such as the biblical references, the mythical symbols such as locus amoenus and other the stereotypical symbols of his culture that their signification depends on taking into account the cultural aspects of his society. In order to get their significance, the reader has to consider not only the entire cultural aspects of the community but also the whole history of Latin America, even that of human beings. In his literary discourse, he has also highlighted the ideology of the community by representing its social conventions and cultural values. As it was obvious in most of his novels, the ideological aspects of the community are mostly depicted by the characters' behaviors and personality and the events that take place in the story and the reactions of the people to them. Therefore, by applying the figurative language, Marquez has made up his literary discourse on the basis of persuasion that induces the reader to feel a precious thing behind the surface structure. Due to this, the reader is engaged in an extra mental activity in order to imaginatively recreate the real world within the symbolized world of the fictional discourse. The reader thus sees the social, cultural and historical aspects of Latin America through various textually symbolized components of his literary discourse.

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