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**Bananeras and Colombian socio-political history in Garcia Marquez's
One Hundred Years of Solitude**

Dr. Arif Mahammad Chaprasi

Faculty Member, Department of English, Sundarban Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

Marquez's magnum opus *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is, in fact, a revolutionary novel that provides a looking glass into the thoughts and beliefs of its author, who chose to give a literary voice to Latin America and especially Colombia, acquaints the reader with the story of seven generations of the Buendia family in the town of Macondo that was founded by the family's patriarch Jose Arcadio Buendia. Marquez's literary imagination was highly coloured by the socio-political history of Colombia and it is noted that many civil wars between the Liberals and the Conservatives depicted in the novel are fictional representations of certain historical events that took place in Colombia. The chief of these was the civil war, the so-called the "War of a Thousand Days" which continued from 1899 to 1902. Colombia had witnessed government brutality and massive violence that continued for more than fifteen years, resulted two hundred thousand politically motivated deaths, and this came to be called "La Violencia" (1948-1968) (Martin 5). The novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* includes an account of a banana workers' strike in 1928 in Colombia's coastal region during the civil war when the army shot and killed an undetermined number of banana workers that took place on 6th December 1928 in the town of Cienaga near Santa Marta, Colombia and the event that came to be locally known as the 'Masacre de las bananeras' (Caro 23). However, the links of Marquez's novel with historical fact was underscored by Garcia Marquez himself later in a conversation with Mendoza when he said that the 'Buendia family could be an account of Latin American history' (Mendoza 73). The purpose of this paper will be to focus on the socio-political aspect of Colombia in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Keywords: Marquez, Solitude, Colombia, Bananeras, Civil war, La Violencia, Macondo, Liberals and Conservative.

Marquez's masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) offers numerous opportunities for courses on Latin American history, politics, culture and civilization. The archetypal dimension of many of the characters provides material for discussion and study of Colombian and Latin American history as well. Obvious parallels to events from

Colombia's past are included in the novel. However, the novel begins with a typical mixture of the quaint and the horrific in a moment of nostalgia: 'Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice' (Solitude 1). At the novel's opening, Macondo is described as isolated, independent and peace-loving town and thereafter once the matriarch Ursula discovers a route to put the town in contact with the outside world, a magistrate (Don Apolinar Moscote) is dispatched by the central Conservative government to administer the town. Thereafter, an extended civil war ensued between the Conservatives and the Liberals. Subsequently, the town of Macondo comes to be exploited and is consummately ruined by an American Fruit Company (foreign imperialist power) when more than three thousands banana growers are massacred by government army and eventually the town of Macondo is entirely wiped out by what is described as a 'biblical hurricane'.

Marquez's literary imagination was highly coloured by the socio-political history of Colombia and it is noted that many events depicted in the novel are fictional representations of certain historical events that took place in Colombia in the first half of the 20th century. He asserts that there's not a single line in this novel which is not based on reality. As Gerald Martin has aptly commented: 'One Hundred years of Solitude can justly claim to being, perhaps, the greatest of all Latin American novels, appropriately enough, since the story of Buendia family is overtly a metaphor for the history of the continent since independence' (Martin 97). Despite the fact that Colombia got its independence from Spain at the Battle of Boyaca in August 1819 and that the nation was distinguished for being one of Latin America's oldest democracies. Between second half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century Colombia had witnessed numerous civil wars, slaughter of 1928, government brutality known as La Violencia (1948-1968), and two hundred thousand politically motivated deaths. It is noted that Marquez's writings often concerned historical tragedies, such as civil wars, the rule of a dictator or an act of brutality by the army against its own people, the revival of political violence before and after the presidential election of 1946, open guerrilla warfare, and finally disjointed fighting under the Liberal and Conservative coalition of the 'National Front', from 1958 to 1975. Regarding the socio-political history the nation had its own long history of political upheavals and the most significance of these was the civil war, the so called the 'War of a Thousand Days' that continued from 1899 to 1902.

The conflict which saw a fierce struggle between the Liberals and the Conservatives for control of the country claimed the lives of over 100000 people, primarily peasants and their sons (Grigore 62-63) and the long civil war ended up with the Treaty of Neerlandia (Solitude 351) that was signed on October 24, 1902 by the liberal General Uribe Uribe in a banana plantation. This historical event clearly echoed in Marquez's novel: '...but a short time after the Treaty of Neerlandia, a piece of chance took him out of his withdrawn self and made him face the reality of the world. A young woman who was selling numbers for the raffle of an accordion greeted him with a great deal of familiarity' (Solitude 192). As Halka pointed out the character of Colonel Aureliano Buendia, as it is portrayed in the

novel, was partially based on the character of the Liberal leader General Uribe Uribe, under whom Marquez's own grandfather Nicholas Ricardo Marquez Mezia had fought.

It needs to be noted that since the novel is set in an area of the world where a pre-colonial history was almost non-existent, Marquez's representation of historical happenings within the realm of fiction is exceptionally significant. The historically event that is significant in the context of the novel is the monopolization of the whole Colombian banana industry by the United Fruit Company. The company which was conglomerate of several American companies soon dominated the whole of the Colombian region and its fledgling banana industry (Anderson 10) and aftermath the company manipulated the price of the fruit and started to subject the planters to economic exploitation and this ultimately led to workers' strikes. As on 12th November 1928, over 32,000 Colombian workers went on a strike demanding various issue but Conservative government sent army to suppress the strike, and they with the help of government troops fired on the unarmed workers and killed thousands of them. This massacre eventuated on 6th December 1928 in the town of Cienaga near Santa Marta, Colombia and this event that came to be called known as 'the slaughter of 1928' or the Banana Massacre (Caro 22-24).

Garcia Marquez's narrative in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* finds the evolving history of the banana company from the arrival of the company in Macondo and its physical and social transformation of the town, through the organization of the workers against the company, to the strike, the massacre at the train station, and the final 'mopping up' operations conducted by the Conservative government with the support of the American army afterwards. It is in chapter 15 of the novel, we are told about the strike of the workers in the banana company and all that the workers demanded was that 'they not be obliged to cut and load bananas on Sundays' (*Solitude* 302). One particular vivid representation is that of the massacre it which in Marquez's writing becomes: "No one moved. — "Five minutes have passed," the captain said in the same tone. — "One more minute and we'll open fire". Jose Arcadio Segundo, sweating ice, lowered the child and gave him to the woman. — "Those bastards might just shoot", she murmured. Jose Arcadio Segundo did not have time to speak because at that instant he recognized the hoarse voice of Colonel Gavilan echoing the words of the woman with a shout. Intoxicated by the tension, by the miraculous depth of the silence, and furthermore convinced that nothing could move that crowd held tight in a fascination with death, Jose Arcadio Segundo raised himself up over the heads in front of him and for the first time in his entire life he raised his voice. — You bastards!! he shouted... that little by little was being reduced to its epicenter as the edges were systematically being cut off all around like an onion being peeled by the insatiable and methodical shears of the machine guns" (*Solitude* 311–312). It is clearly observed that a recent biography of Garcia Marquez by Dalso Saldivar has indicated that it was only after the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967 that 'the majority of the Colombians started to talk about the three thousand deaths of the banana workers...' (*Posada-Carbo* 398).

As has been noted in passing above, (underlying almost all the conflicts) political currents during the struggle for independence came to be formalized in 1849, and finally in post-independence Colombia two political parties were established in 1850: the Conservatives (with centralist tendencies) and the Liberals (with federalist leanings). There had been an ideological tussle between those as the centrists wanted the government to have complete political control even to the point of requiring state and city officials to be appointed by the central government instead of being elected by their constituents. The federalists wanted a degree of autonomy for both state and city governments. These ideological issues and formations are clearly reflected, albeit in a slanted way, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the thrust towards centralization is suggested by the arrival of the magistrate Don Apolinar Moscote in the town of Macondo. The coming of magistrate virtually amounted to an intrusion of a centrist governmental power. However, it is also evident that Marquez's character Colonel Aureliano Buendia asks his friend Colonel Gerineldo Marquez why the latter was fighting, and as he is told that Marquez was under the impression that he was fighting 'for the great liberal party' (*Solitude* 139).

Beyond this, Colombia had witnessed civil unrest, governmental brutality and deadly violence between the liberals and the conservatives during the mid-twentieth century that broke out in the Colombian countryside with small and large landowners dispossessed and their possessions burned, men murdered, as well as women raped. Some called the perpetrators guerrillas, others called them bandits. It began in Bogota with the assassination of the popular leader of the left-wing of the Liberal party, Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, on April 9, 1948. Gaitan had originally come to prominence in 1924 by exposing the brutality of the army's suppression of the banana strike in Santa Marta. Named the bogotazo, the riots that followed the assassination leveled large parts of the city, burned down the papers of a law student named Garcia Marquez, and left thousands dead. The violence continued for more than fifteen years, and this came to be called *La Violencia* (1948-1968) in Colombian history. Garcia Marquez thoroughly depicts this event in his magnum opus *One Hundred Years of Solitude* through the lens of history, as he says how both 'left-wing' and 'right-wing' individuals and organizations were responsible for the internecine bloodshed.

To reiterate, a close estimation of the socio-political facts shaped in the novel's narrative of events, Marquez wanted to depict the history (bloody) of Latin America through the lens of Latin American people in an insightful way that defends the political and social hardships they have had to face: '...we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable'. Marquez further says: 'nevertheless, in the face of oppression, pillage and abandonment, our reply is life...' (Marquez, Nobel Lecture).

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