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REPRESENTING POWER AND POWERLESSNESS IN GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ'S SHORT STORIES BIG MAMA'S FUNERAL AND A VERY OLD MAN WITH ENORMOUS WINGS

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ABSTRACT

Latin America, especially Colombia was always troubled with a chaotic history. The concentration of wealth and resources in the hands of the elite and the powerful, had made the place a turbulent one for the underprivileged. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short stories provided a platform for the common man to recognize the harsh realities endured by them. Social inequality and power relations constitute the central theme of many of his short stories. The short stories selected for discussion in this paper, Big Mama's Funeral and A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings are centred around the questions of power and powerlessness. Marquez encourages his readers to question the unequal distribution of power, resources, value and human dignity and also to challenge the corrupted social systems that generate inequality and hierarchies.

Keywords: Social Inequality, Excessive Power, Powerlessness, Exploitation, Human Dignity

1. INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a seminal figure in Latin American literature was "inevitably concerned with the whole history of his country and continent" Minta (1987). His literary narratives constantly addressed the issues of poverty, social inequality, power, class division in Latin America. Social inequality in its multi-faceted forms is depicted in the literary works of Latin American writers, especially Marquez. His novels, novellas and short stories portray the unheard voices of common man. The unequal access to dignity, freedom and political authority aggravated the problems in Latin America. The lives and rights of the marginalized were given no value by the authorities. The social structures established by them determined whose voices to be silenced and whose sufferings to be ignored.

Colombia, the native place of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, deeply shaped his literary imagination. The socio-political realities prevalent in Colombia provided a major backdrop to discuss the questions of power and inequality in his works. The concentration of power in the hands of the elites resulted in the abject powerlessness of ordinary people. Marquez's literary narratives represented the new voices that emerged from the oppressed sections of the society upon the realization that, "The narratives and discourses that present the world to us do not describe the world but constitute the world we understand, and these narratives and discourses are deemed to be politically motivated by any, or all of such things as race, gender, class, nationality, religion and sexual orientation: there is no narrative or discourse which is independent of some vested interest" Earnshaw (2014).

Marquez's short stories provided a platform for the common man to recognize the harsh realities endured by them. His short stories are remarkable not only for their narrative brilliance but also for their engagement with complex realities in Latin America, especially Colombia. His ability to combine fantasy with realities made him one of the iconic figures in world literature. Social inequality and power relations constitute the central theme of many of his short stories. The short stories, selected for discussion in this paper, also highlight these themes. The privileges enjoyed by corrupt leaders and elite classes are being analysed through the short story *Big Mama's Funeral*. Abject powerlessness of common people constitutes the discussion of the short story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*. This contrast between powerful and powerless people helps Gabriel Garcia Marquez to expose social and economic inequalities prevalent in Colombia.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez has always fascinated his readers through his characters. This paper attempts to discuss two central figures from two of his short stories *Big Mama's Funeral* and *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*. These two characters are poles apart. But together they can be seen as representations of the absurdities of social hierarchies. Big Mama represents the concentration of wealth and power, whereas the old man is a representative of those who are deprived of all privileges. Big Mama, an enormously powerful woman had lived a life of wealth and power. Her funeral is being depicted in this short story as an affirmation of her social position. The old man in the story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* is portrayed as a mysterious creature with wings. His social position made him powerless and nobody treated him with compassion. He became a victim of exploitation for financial profit. Thus, Big Mama and old man emerge as representatives of two social orders in Latin America, the former representing enormous social power and the latter representing those who had been denied even basic human dignity.

There has always been attempt to denigrate the works of Marquez as only magical. This is being seen as a deliberate attempt of the powerful to erase the alternate versions of realities that arose from the margins. Gabriel Garcia Márquez in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech titled *The Solitude of Latin America* emphasized on the point of marginalizing the alternate versions of realities put forward by the Latin American writers as magically realist by the western canons of thoughts. He says, "Poets and beggars, warriors and scoundrels, all of us who are creatures of that disordered reality have had to ask very little of our imaginations, because the greatest challenge for us has been the insufficiency of conventional devices to make our lives believable. This, friends, is the core of our solitude…… It is understandable that they insist on measuring us with the same yardstick they use to measure themselves, not remembering that the ravages of life are not the same for everyone, and that the search for identity is as arduous and bloody for us as it

was for them. The interpretation of our reality using foreign systems only contributes to making us more and more unknown, less and less free, more and more" Márquez (2008). Magical Realism, irony, grotesque imagery and dark humour are some of the predominant characteristic features of the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The bleak realities of Latin America were exposed through the techniques of Magical Realties. But the attempts of the elites and the powerful to conceal such realities resulted in criticizing magical realism as a technique only grounded in supernaturalism and not in reality. The questions of class, power and social inequality are discussed through these features, thereby generating a sustained engagement of the readers to understand and resist the unequal social structures predominant in Latin America.

Stephen M Hart in his work *Gabriel Garcia Márquez* defines the influence of magical realism in Latin American works. He states, "I shall propose a working definition (the secret of magical realism lies in its ability to depict reality objectively but with a magical dimension) and test the following hypothesis: the phantom in magical realist fiction is the projection within an ideologically riven nation of a subaltern forced to "disappear" as a result of lying (in both senses of the term) on the wrong side of the political, gender or race line" (84). Marquez depended on this technique to deal with subaltern perspectives oppressed by the dominant culture. Several magical elements are incorporated in his works for the readers to easily comprehend the complexity of the situations in their land. The supernatural aspects depicted in the works are actually symbolic representations of the suppressed and distorted realities of Latin America. The incidents that used to happen in Latin America can never be represented using any of the yardsticks of Western ideologies. The interests of the readers are aroused through such techniques and they will develop critical inquisitiveness to expose the alternate versions of realities around them.

Excessive accumulation of power in the hands of the privileged sections of the society and dehumanization of the powerless are being critiqued through this paper. *Big Mama's Funeral*, first published in 1962, is an exposition of the socio-cultural norms of the Colombian society at that time. Set in the imaginary town of Macondo, the short story revolves around the death of a prominent woman of that place, called Big Mama. She passed away on a Tuesday in the month of September, at the age of 92. She is regarded as "the absolute sovereign of the Kingdom of Macondo" (153). Her funeral turned out to be a public event, attended by political leaders, rich and elite classes, religious authorities and also common people. Big Mama was not an ordinary woman. She possessed extensive wealth and resources. The power of this inherited wealth enabled her to extend her influence over the socio-political and economic affairs of the region.

An exaggerated presentation of her funeral events reflected the enormous influence she had over the community. A private family event has thus turned to be an event of national spectacle. Ordinary people became mere spectators in this powerful display of wealth and resources inherited by her family by exploiting them. Marquez satirizes the system of inequality prevalent in Colombia, where poor has always remained poor. No attempt was made from the part of the authorities for the upliftment of the weaker sections of the society. The event was witnessed by influential people from different sections of the society. They had no commitment for poor and had always exhibited allegiance to rich and powerful people of their regions. They made no effort to alleviate social inequality prevalent in their society. But they found time to participate in pompous events, displaying wealth and power.

The wealth and resources of Big Mama are also brought under scrutiny through this work. The enormous wealth of Big Mama had blurred the distinction between her private possessions and national wealth. This shows that power was vested upon the interests of those people who had exploited common people and national resources. The concentration of economic power in the hands of certain privileged families in Colombia had made the lives of the common man miserable. Big Mama's funeral attended by elite and powerful, displayed the idea that leaders and powerful had invested more importance to the needs of the privileged sections than the needs of the underprivileged.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short stories explore the two extremes of power-excessive power and abject powerlessness. If Big Mama is a representative of the first one, the winged old man symbolizes powerlessness. The extraordinary physical appearance of the old man with wings, made him powerless. He appeared at the courtyard of Pelayo and Elisenda. People began categorizing him as an angel or simply as a figure of curiosity. His wings plunged him into a state of misery and otherness. He became an object of exploitation. Pelayo and Elisenda began to utilize the public curiosity that arose from his appearance. He became an object for monetary benefit. He was denied the identity of a human being. He became a spectacle and source of profit. His human dignity was ignored by the people who had used him for economic benefits.

The economic conditions of Pelayo and Elisenda had forced them to compromise the dignity of another human being. Through this, Marquez conveys the idea that the system creates opportunities for vulnerable people to exploit others. Nobody was interested to treat the old man with compassion. They looked upon him only as a commodity. The old man was not in a position to resist this exploitation. The social system was not ready to accept him with difference and made his body an object of public spectacle.

This paper attempts to highlight the idea that institutional attention is given only to those who are powerful and economically stable. The authorities found time to participate in the funeral of Big Mama, but found no time to resist the oppression of an old man. This is because Big Mama had the power to define her worth and position, while the poor old man lacked power to determine his worth. The body image is also being analysed through these two works. Big Mama's body became a public spectacle after her death, whereas the body of the old man became a public spectacle during his lifetime. In both these cases, society emerges as an agent of consumption. Big Mama's social status became helpful for her to control the spectacle of her funeral as a sign of respect. The old man's powerlessness results in the exploitation of his body. Thus, the body emerges as a site of inequality, where invisible structures of power can exert immense influence.

The unequal distribution of power and resources can result in the difference in the treatment of human dignity. Big Mama and the old man, representing two social hierarchies, can be read as complementary representations of inequality and power. Through them, Gabriel Garcia Marquez encourages readers to challenge those social systems that do not consider all people the same. He asks his readers to question the unequal distribution of power, resources, value and human dignity. Thus, through the contrasting representations of power and powerlessness, this paper attempts to challenge the social order in which human dignity is being measured through the yardsticks of power, wealth, usefulness and social status.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

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