

# BREAKING THE CRUX OF SOLITUDE:

Sexual Violence in *100 Years of Solitude*

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Gabriel García Márquez's epic, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is the most influential Latin American novel of the twentieth century. The novel is the most famous literary example of "magical realism," although as Rebecca Wortzman argues, the term should not be understood as a denial of real violence but as an attempt to represent it. In "Breaking the Crux of Solitude: Sexual Violence in *100 Years of Solitude*," Wortzman argues that Márquez's depictions of sexual violence, including incest, prostitution, and pedophilia, are connected to his larger literary project, which is to try to represent the way isolation is experienced by exploited individuals, colonies, and regions of the world.

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**G**abriel García Márquez's epic novel *100 Years of Solitude* traces the rise and fall of the fictional town of Macondo.

Although this novel has events that seem to draw clear links to the history of Colombia and other Latin American countries, García Márquez's narrative blends myth, reality, the oral tradition, and history to create a fantastical and life-filled work of fiction. In

this patriarchal society, men and women alike are plunged into what German Carrillo describes as “a complex treatise with solitude [where]” characters are “not merely in search of meaningful dialogue with fellow man; instead each character incarnates a particular facet of solitude” (187). Men in this novel are engulfed in states of solitude by the nature of long, brutal military campaigns, lost love, and a fascination with science and experimentation. They take a more active role in the plot and politics of the town but Ursula, the family’s matriarch, serves as the backbone of social order and is able to bring men out of their isolation. Although she serves this role, women in Macondo experience solitude as well, often through exploitive sexual relationships. García Márquez’s depiction of sexual violence and solitary female characters serves to develop two major ideas: one, to voice unheard narratives in Latin American history, and two, to demonstrate the nature of exploitive relationships and how they can problematically serve as an allegory for Latin American history. In this novel, García Márquez uses scenes of artificial, exploitive, disturbing or violent sexual relationships as microcosms for larger themes in the text, and

to demonstrate the repercussions of living as powerless, misunderstood, and solitary subjects.

*100 Years of Solitude* is an epic novel that spans over a hundred-year period. It focuses on the Buendia family from the time they leave their hometown, to the establishment of Macondo, through the town's various catastrophes and moments of prosperity, and to their eventual complete deterioration. Ursula and Jose Arcadio Buendia are the parents of this family, which gives rise to Aureliano, Jose Arcadio, and Amaranta, and they adopt several other nieces, orphans, and grandchildren under their wings. This novel is intentionally unsummarizable and confusing. The family names are repeated from generation to generation, characters die only to return as active members later on in the plot, age and time are malleable, and the plot accelerates at a pace that is absurd at times, referring to events of the past that will not be fully explained until later in the text. These narrative characteristics signal to the larger theme of nature cycles of rejuvenation, in contrast to the destructive tendencies of vicious human circles. One of these destructive vicious circles is the recurring impulse for members of

the Buendia family to commit incest. Ursula and Jose Arcadio are cousins, and they leave to found Macondo because of a fear that their child will have a tail. This fear is finally realized at the conclusion of the novel with the disturbing birth of Aureliano Babilonia's and Amaranta Ursula's child, which marks the end of the Buendia line and the destruction of Macondo itself. Like the family, the town progresses through cycles and is constantly being pulled out of its isolation and into the world; it transitions from a space that is surrounded by impenetrable forest with the remnants of colonial rule overtaken by nature, to a prosperous American banana plantation, to the centrepiece of a civil war. Events occur generation after generation, until Macondo is eventually wiped out by a "biblical hurricane" that exiles the city "from the memory of men" (García Márquez 415).

The events of this novel are, at times, unreal, absurd, and magical, and are all depicted using two important narrative techniques. They allow García Márquez to create a fantastical world that is still able to speak to the reality of lived experience. Firstly, García Márquez exaggerates circumstances to the point of absurdity. This

technique, John Brushwood argues, makes reality “larger than life” so that it becomes “big enough for us to see” (14). In this light, the unreal quality of his exaggerated narrative actually allows the reader to better understand the repercussions and reality of a life of solitude. Secondly, García Márquez employs an even narrative tone, which serves to equalize events with varying degrees of fantasy, reality, myth, and exaggeration. Brushwood explains the way the narrator “treats the commonplace as if it were exceptional and the exceptional as it were commonplace” (10). The dreamlike quality of the first section of the novel trains the reader to accept reality as it exists in fictional Macondo. He exposes readers to absurd and at times hilarious reactions to traveling gypsies’ inventions. For example, seeing ice for the first time becomes a lasting and important nostalgic memory, whereas flying carpets are passed over as if they are routine happenings. This narrative equalization creates a setting where anything can and does happen. Later in the novel, García Márquez exploits this narrative technique to convey much more serious ideas than the legends of gypsies. It serves both to represent the Latin American storytelling

tradition, as well as to make a history like that of Colombia's - where the population endures events similar in nature, if not scale, to those of Macondo - believable. There are many places in the text where his writing invites readers to understand the novel allegorically, signalling to real historical events, but also many places where the text resists that. García Márquez's narrative attempts to "deflate" versions of history, and "produce more revealing, though more painful interpretations" (Aizenberg 1245). This allows the reader to recognize, as Edna Aizenberg argues, that "all histories - [García Márquez's] included - are interpretative constructions, fictions that refer to themselves and other fictions" (Aizenberg 1245). Engaging with historical narratives is a large part of García Márquez's work, but reading this text completely allegorically would be doing it a great injustice. García Márquez is attempting to convey lived experiences that are largely unheard, not plausible, or excluded from mainstream historical narratives and the psychic repercussions of this kind of solitude. He is also attempting to depict the solitude of nations whose histories, as the people of these countries have lived and understood them,

remain unheard. Reading characters or events in this epic as real reinforces the solitude of individuals by reducing them to symbols. Using scenes of disturbing sexual relationships, I shall attempt to demonstrate the repercussions of solitude of this nature as well as to illustrate the way that this tension functions in the text.

In *100 Years of Solitude*, Aureliano Buendia partakes in a brief but disturbing scene with a young, nameless gypsy prostitute. In this vignette, exaggeration takes on a grotesque form as the narrator describes the terrible circumstances that Aureliano witnesses. The young girl's back is "raw", with her skin "stuck to her ribs and her breathing forced from immeasurable exhaustion" (García Márquez 52). Aureliano, a virgin, must help the girl wring out the sheets from the "sweat and sighs" of "sixty-three men [that] had passed through the room that night" after paying the twenty cent fee to her grandmother (51). John Deveny and Juan Manuel Marcos criticize García Márquez's depiction of female characters, arguing that they act to "reinforce the notion of women as the natural servant to male appetites" (87). What they fail to recognize is that not only is this girl in debt to

her grandmother, but the language and exaggerated circumstances serve to depict the solitary nature of social degradation, abuse, and exploitation – not underpin them. She is unable to attend to her needs and desires until her monetary debt has been repaid. Although Aureliano does not sleep with her, the girl maintains the artifice of this transaction in keeping up her “efforts” (52). The solitary and unreal circumstances – which this girl is forced to endure night after night, for what she calculates will be at least ten more years – serve to parallel not only the solitude of a particular female voice and experience, but also the absurdity of living in debt to a greater power. Like the debt many Latin American countries owe to other global powers, their circumstances become defined by an inability to escape, or attend to anything else.

Aureliano decides to come to what he understands as her rescue the following morning, but finds that she and her Grandmother have left. He is devastated by his inability to save her, and “resign[s] himself to being a womanless man for all his life” (53). Although readers may see this as a noble act, it is problematized by the nature of the relationship that he envisions with her. After

one night, Aureliano makes the decision “to marry her in order to free her from the despotism of her grandmother and to enjoy all the nights of satisfaction that she would give seventy men” (52). Although there is no doubt that being the wife of a man with wealth would be better than being a child prostitute, it is not clear whether or not she is not trading one form of bondage for another. Although more comfortable, a forced marriage to a stranger may lead to the same solitude experienced in her present conditions.

Quickly after renouncing female relationships, Aureliano meets Remedios Moscote, a young girl who has not yet reached the age of puberty. The proximity of these two relationships and the age of the girls allow the reader to draw parallels between Aureliano’s paedophiliac tendencies. Because Aureliano is opposed to the child prostitute giving her grandmother the profits reaped from her body, he showers Remedios with gifts and attention, and both families agree they can marry. Although these circumstances differ substantially, neither of these girls has an ability to voice or attend to her needs, nor does Aureliano make any real effort to understand them. He imposes his preconception of what

they desire onto them, recreating the solitude of being powerless in any relationship. Like many Latin American countries being treated as nascent economies that need the guidance of greater world powers, these young girls are trapped in a cycle of debt, or a relationship of political convenience between two affluent families. Help from the patriarchal figure will not help them escape their solitude. Remedios is ripped from the innocence of her childhood, and the repercussion of this unnatural relationship is clear when she dies “poisoned by her own blood, with a pair of twins crossed in her stomach” (86). García Márquez does not allow for either of their salvations in order to display the repercussions of routine solitude that comes from a powerless existence. His depiction of these girls is not intended to demonstrate the way reality should be; rather, he aims to depict an untold narrative. He creates these circumstances using exaggeration and an even tone in order to allow events as routine as a marriage, or as disturbing as a young girl being forced to sleep with sixty men a night, to become both believable and telling of the real experiences similar to these.

Solitude in this novel functions as a powerful force with the ability to break a

character's connection to reality. Solitude takes on a range of forms, from an inability to attend to needs, to being unable to voice one's experience or have it understood. Oftentimes female characters - particularly Ursula, the matriarch of the Buendia family - are able to pull people out of these dangerous and isolated states. Pilar Ternera serves as Ursula's matriarchal foil. She exists outside of societal norms, willingly engaging in sexual relationships with a variety of men, and maintaining no familial structure of her own. As the people of Macondo become increasingly disenfranchised from reality, and as the plot rushes to its prophetic end, it seems that reality itself ceases to exist in Macondo. In these final moments of the novel, Aureliano Babilonia (not the one who marries Remedios) visits two brothels, some of the last establishments left in this abandoned town. The first brothel shows a complete break from reality, where people are unable to distinguish between actual events and their own imaginations. The second brothel, run by Pilar, is called the Golden Child and is a fantastical space that articulates the solitude of individuals outside societal norms.

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The exaggerated circumstances of the first brothel that Aureliano and his friends enter displays the tangible effects that solitude has on people's understanding of reality and their interactions with others. The girls who work at the brothel are described only through the desires that motivate their actions. They are girls going to "bed because of hunger" (388). The customers have "accepted as something certain an establishment that did not exist except in their imagination, because even the tangible things there are unreal" (388-89). The brothel is founded on relationships of artifice and deception, as all parties involved attempt to disguise their desperation through sexual acts. In the final section of the novel, the blurring of reality and imagination becomes so extreme that a German patron "trie[s] to burn the house down to show that it [does] not exist" (389-90). Like the young girl prostitute whom Aureliano encounters in the opening scenes of the novel, these girls have no control over their bodies and are bound to the proprietress through their hunger. These girls take off their flowered dresses "with the same innocence which they put them on," and exclaim "in the paroxysms of love" that the

“roof is falling in” (389). Their solitude has led to a complete disconnect from reality.

Pilar Ternera – who is the longest surviving character in the novel, and, as previously mentioned, serves as a matriarchal foil to Ursula Buendia – runs the second brothel that Aureliano encounters. Throughout the novel, Pilar is the matriarch of the Other, managing the absurd, insatiable, and solitary desires of the men and women of Macondo. She herself experiences the solitude of having been abandoned by “countless men” who sought her out, and whom she “never refused” (152). Given the accelerated pace and exaggerated circumstances at the conclusion of the novel, it is fitting that Pilar would live out her solitude in the fantastical “zoological brothel” – an

earthly paradise that has the atmosphere of having been just created [ . . . ] with Amazonian camellias [ . . . ] herons of different colors, crocodiles as fat as pigs, snakes with seven rattles, and a turtle with a gilded shell who dove in a small artificial ocean. (294)

This bizarre mix of the natural and the artificial is coined the “greenhouse of illusions” and maintains the same precarious relationship to

reality as the previous brothel, with the difference being that it is rooted in Pilar's "ability to recall the past" (395). It demonstrates the ways in which living close to social structures - without being quite integrated with or accepted into them - creates a solitude that wears down existing communal connections. It results in a reclaiming of nature - a nature that is fantastical and unnatural in its own right.

Although Pilar is associated with Otherness, she never commits the ultimate form of social solitude: incest. When her son, Arcadio, attempts to sleep with her without knowing that she is his mother, she hires Santa Sofia de Piedad to sleep with him instead. The pull and desire for incest, one of the many vicious and narrowing human circles in the novel, finally triumphs in the disturbing scene where Aureliano Babilonia rapes his Aunt Amaranta Ursula, which results in the dreaded tailed child. This prophecy is only able to happen at the conclusion of the novel when Macondo is already disconnected from reality, allowing the couple to "lose a sense of reality [and] a notion of time" (405). Without the help of Ursula to restore social order, they become engrossed in their own disturbing sexual

relationship and Amaranta dies in labour. When nature reclaims the Buendias' family home, it becomes a "domestic jungle" that is uncontrollable and in a state of decay in juxtaposition to the Golden Child (410). Pilar remains the matriarch of these unnatural animals and is able to control her brothel, like she could the unsocial desires of the men of the Buendia family. Her illusory brothel, outside of time, is a tangible expression of reality running down. García Márquez uses these brothels to literalize solitude - manifested through the constant narrowing and eventual destruction by vicious human circles - and show how it can exile communities into realms of fantasy and unreality.

*100 Years of Solitude* has received a variety of criticisms surrounding its connection to the contentious literary category of magical realism, and its role in shaping Colombian national identity - more generally, its relationship to Latin American literature. To categorize the fantastical events in this novel as purely tropes of magical realism would serve to simplify the ideas with which García Márquez is engaging in this epic novel. In his Nobel acceptance speech, he recalls the pre-colonial images of Latin America as the site for

the adventures of El Dorado, fantastical animals, and the first European encounters with Native Americans, which provoked Eurocentric images of an unbelievable and illusory land. Since colonial independence, García Márquez points to the fantastic state “funeral for the right leg” that General Antonio Lopez de Santana lost in the pastry war as one example of the historically accurate events in Latin American history that may seem implausible to Western readers (Nobel Speech). He discusses the unimaginable horrors of war, death, and destruction that have been experienced across the continent. Through the inflation and exaggeration of reality in this novel, García Márquez attempts to solve what he deems the “crucial problem” of Latin American solitude: namely “a lack of conventional means to render [their] lives believable” (Nobel Speech). The scenes of disturbing sexual relationships, the recurring theme of incest, and the prevalence of prostitution and exploitation are not solely lived experiences, nor fantastical exaggerations. He uses these scenes to depict the ways in which solitude is felt and lived on an individual basis, as a community, and as a nation. The novel concludes with the complete

annihilation of a town, family, and history. The final line states: "races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth" (417). In articulating the story of this particular race, García Márquez produces a conventional - in its form as an epic novel - way of rendering their lives believable, thereby allowing a break in the "crux of [ . . . ] solitude" experienced by Latin America.

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