

Capitalism, Imperialism and Apocalypse of Macondo in Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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Abstract:

This study attempts to examine how capitalism and imperialism invites apocalypse of a Place Macondo in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel One Hundred Years of Solitude. The novel is a classic example of magical realism but the novelist criticizes the white capitalistic and imperialistic system in Americas. Macondo, the microcosmic setting of the novel, the Eden like village, takes up capitalistic mode of production system, exploits science and technology, grows into an advanced commercial town and invites the foreign economic power for investment. The arrival of the foreign power proves ironic in the destiny of the town.. The foreign investor who not only exploit the human resources of the town but also squeeze the natural resources of the area dry creating impact in the climatic and weather situations of the town. Due to uncontrolled exploitation of human and natural resources, the alliance of local bourgeois with foreign imperial power untimely brings unexpected apocalypse of Macondo.

Keywords: capitalism, commercialization, industrialization, imperialism, apocalypse

Written in magical realist form, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* relates the beginning, development and apocalypse of Macondo, initially a village in the swamp in the middle of a remote tropical jungle. First, the village looks like an ideal village, “where no one was over thirty and no one had died” (*Solitude* 9). The novel presents the story of one hundred years dramatizing the events in Buendia family and Macondo and ends with juxtaposition. The Buendia family was warned of a child with pig's tail when Ursula and José Arcadio Buendia, two cousins, were married, neglecting the warnings given by their parents. The seventh-generation child is born with a pig's tail out of the incestuous relationship between the aunt and the nephew. The Sanskrit manuscript written by Melquiades is finally deciphered by Aureliano Babilonia, the sixth generation Buendia descendant and the town is erased from the earth as it is swept away by a hurricane, a total apocalypse of the town and its inhabitants. The apocalypse of the town was already predicted as the ideal village had taken the capitalistic course of development that invited imperialism and ultimate apocalypse.

What is capitalism and how it evolves in Macondo? Borrowing Marx's terms, Robert Heilbroner enumerates three major features of capitalism: “an all-important dependency on the successful accumulation of capital, wide-ranging use of market mechanism and a unique bifurcation of power into two sectors, one public one private” (1321). All these features match with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Macondo's

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patriarch José Arcadio Buendia's thirst for knowledge, thirst for power and thirst for money metamorphoses Macondo to a town from a model village but capitalism does not still pervade Macondo in the first generation. First Macondo starts consuming imported goods and becomes dependent on exterior supply of goods, a bazaar of some unseen commercial agents. Slowly, the crossflow of the people increase in Macondo and it becomes a commercial town establishing all the prerequisites of capitalism. Capitalism flourishes with Macondo's connection with the outside world through boats and railroads.

The improvised boat of José Arcadio Segundo, which heralds the connection of Macondo with the sea, is followed by industries and train. José Arcadio Buendia's reaction with a large block of ice "This is the great invention of our time" (28) in the first chapter of the novel, takes material shape in his third generation. Aureliano Triste, one of Colonel Aureliano Buendia's seventeen sons, opens an ice factory. The narrator describes, "Aureliano Triste, with the cross of ashes on his forehead, set up on the edge of town the ice factory that José Arcadio Buendia had dreamed of in his inventive delirium" (222). Aureliano Segundo, one of the great-grandsons of the Buendia makes a lavish investment in the new product. The novel signals the emergence of investors and industrialists in the town. The production of the ice overruns the demand in the local market and the situation forces the manufacturers to find a new market. The narrator describes the situation:

In a short time, he had increased the production of ice to such a degree that it was too much for the local market and Aureliano Triste had to think about the possibility of expanding the business to other towns in the swamp. It was then that he thought of the decisive step, not only for the modernization of his business but to link the town with the rest of the world. "We have to bring in the railroad," he said. (226) Aureliano Triste's this drive echoes Marx's description of the bourgeois in A Manifesto of the Communist Party: "The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases bourgeois over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere and establish connections everywhere" (12). True to Marx's claims, Aureliano Triste leaves the ice factory in the responsibility of his brother Aureliano Centeno, goes in search of a new market, disappears for a long time and returns with the train.

Aureliano Centeno invents new product using ice and fruit juice, which signals the emergence of factories and the need for a larger market. Aureliano Triste is the first of the bourgeoisie in Macondo and the introduction of the train must be understood in the epochal narrative of capitalistic economic production and expansion. Gerald Martin thinks of Aureliano Triste, "the man who turned the magical ice into a commodity, which we can construe as representative of the impact of the embryonic local bourgeois" (222). When all seventeen sons come to Buendia house to visit their father Colonel Aureliano Buendia, one of them Aureliano Centeno breaks whatever breakable objects he finds in

the house. The same person later invents a new product. Aureliano Centeno's action can be related to the modification and modernization of commodities. It's the nature of bourgeois production system to make new amendment in the product and replace the old ones by new ones. Aureliano Centeno breaks plates and pots in the Buendia house just before he invents a new product. Symbolically Centeno suggests the replacement of the old objects by the new ones, symbolically suggesting the arrival of a new era.

The arrival of the train in Macondo signals the period of advancement, a full swing modernization of the town. Daniel Erickson gives the same opinion, "The introduction of the railway is clearly a part of capitalist modernization and historical transformation, a progressive pattern that accordingly undermines Ursula's impression of circularity" (148). The events of the novel prove that time was passing in circles before the arrival of the train but its arrival coincides with epochal changes. The narrator describes how Macondo's fate is related with the arrival of the train: "The innocent yellow train that was to bring so many ambiguities and certainties, so many pleasant and unpleasant moments, so many changes, calamities and feelings of nostalgia to Macondo" (228). The entry of the train in Macondo accelerates the development of other "marvelous inventions", Macondo reaches the stage of complete modernization with the inclusion of electricity, cinema and other industrial products. Brian Conniff associates the arrival of the train in Macondo with the arrival of the train in Latin/Spanish America, that brings "ambiguities and certainties". He observes, "From the first half of the nineteenth century, the combination of foreigners and trains was devastating, in Argentina, in Chile, in Guatemala, in Mexico and in Uruguay" (177). There were two major effects in the aftermath of the train: frenzied imports and growing debts, which ultimately prepare the ground for dependency. The destiny of Latin/Spanish countries and Macondo is shaped in the same way.

The train is the symbol of Macondo's connection with the rest of the world. In the beginning, except periodical arrivals of the gypsies, Macondo was in complete isolation without any relation with other parts of the country. The arrival of the magistrate brings Macondo within the national territory and it's the train that marks Macondo's relation with the rest of the world. Brian Conniff identifies the arrival of the train in Macondo with Latin America, "the train is, if anything, even more, symbolic of this 'progress' in Colombia than it is in Macondo. Under the dictatorship of General Rafael Reyes (1904-1909), British capital was, for the first time, invested in Colombian railways insubstantial amount" (176). Conniff is right in his comment because the train did not come to Macondo because of the efforts of local people, rather it was brought by some unknown power and Marquez does not make it clear in the novel. The train must have come to Macondo with the investment of some foreign power. Electricity and cinema bring further wonder and amazement in Macondo and the people are divided into delight and dilemma simultaneously. The narrator notes this dual feeling as if God had decided to "put to the

test every capacity for surprise and was keeping the inhabitants of Macondo in a permanent alternation between excitement and disappointment, doubt and revelation, to such an extreme that no one knew for certain where the limits of reality lay” (230). The civil war had made the town economically vulnerable and the technological advancement makes the townspeople emotionally vulnerable and Macondo becomes a ripe playground for the externals making Macondo dependent on foreign investment.

Even the coincidences play a major role in the novel. It was one of such coincidences when Mr. Herbert, an American visits the Buendia house and gets an opportunity to taste a banana. The coincidence of eating bananas invites so many contradictions and consequences in the destiny of Macondo as Mr. Herbert decides to make a study for the prospects of commercial banana cultivation. “The little yellow train” in its turn brings investors from America, which ultimately decides the destiny of advancing town.

After he had made the study of the area with the help of engineers, agronomists, hydrologists, topographers and surveyors, another American Mr. Brown arrives in Macondo with his German Shephard dog travelling in a special coach of the train. The special coach and the dog symbolically mark his status. Soon the town is filled with American men, who make special encampment of wooden houses with zinc roofs. Soon these men are followed by their wives with muslin dresses and hats. The townspeople think them the new incarnation of the gypsies but these new gypsies are more clamorous than the formers. Daniel Erickson sees Mr. Herbert as the harbinger of imperialism in Macondo. He elucidates, “Within a page and half of the introduction of the train, this eruption of modernity brings the reader, Mr. Herbert, and twentieth-century imperialism in the form of the U. S. banana company” (149). Katherine J. Hampares too supports Erickson’s argument: “In this story, Mr. Herbert symbolized the United States’ economic and political policies towards Latin America” (5). The banana company paralyzes the economy of Macondo in the days to come.

The Americans’ arrival brings both economic as well as a social counterculture. The people of Macondo marvel at them when a couple makes love in broad daylight in the view of people. The men who came without wife spend their time with the French prostitutes, who were there before the arrival of the train. The narrator describes their relationship with the prostitutes:

For the foreigners who arrived without love they converted the street of the loving matrons from France into a more extensive village than it had been, and on one glorious Wednesday they brought in a trainload of strange whores, Babylonish women skilled in age-old methods and in possession of all manner of unguents and devices to stimulate the unaroused, to give courage to the timid, to satiate the voracious, to exalt the modest man, to teach a lesson to repeaters, and to correct solitary people. (233)

Marquez gives evidence of how Macondo is degraded or degenerated. The gypsies introduced prostitution in Macondo, the French matrons gave the commercial shape and the arrival of the Americans sets the whole town on fire of prostitution. Commenting on open sexual activities, Colonel Aureliano Buendia comments, “Look at the mess we’ve got ourselves into just because we invited a gringo to eat some bananas” (234). The arrival of the American leads the town into a new arena of struggle, cultural, social and economic.

The imperialistic phase of Macondo is symbolically suggested by the crossflow of people in the Buendia house. The narrator describes this crossflow, “It became necessary to add bedrooms off the courtyard, widen the dining room, and exchange the old table for one that held sixteen people, with new china and silver, and even then they had to eat lunch in shifts” (234). While making investments in foreign countries, the imperialists make an alliance with a trustworthy local bourgeois and the arrival of foreigners in the Buendia house should be understood in this connection. When the banana company is finally established, the Americans do not even think about the Buendia house and the local security force is reformulated as per the interest of the company. The narrator describes the security situation, “When the banana company arrived, however, the local functionaries were replaced by dictatorial foreigners whom Mr. Brown brought to live in the electrified chicken yard so that they could enjoy, as he explained it, the dignity that their status warranted . . . ” (244). The authorities of Macondo become defunct and paralyzed and Mr. Brown the owner of the banana company handles de facto administration of the town. The shift of power proves how powerful the imperialists are.

The responsibility Macondo’s security management in the hands of the foreigners challenges the law and order of the town, which had just woken up from the pangs of twenty-year civil war. The new security men show inhuman cruelty to the citizens of Macondo. The narrator gives an example of a police corporal, who kills a seven-year-old boy and his grandfather just because the boy accidentally spilled a cold drink in the officer’s uniform. The narrator describes this cruelty, “. . . the barbarian cut him to pieces, and with one stroke he cut off the head of the grandfather as he tried to stop him” (244). This incident infuriates Colonel Aureliano Buendia and he shouts, “One of these days, I am going to arm my boys and we can get rid of these shitty gringos” (245). Within one week, Aureliano’s 16 sons are killed one after another: “During the course of that week, at different places along the coast, his seventeen sons were hunted down like rabbits by invisible criminals who aimed at the center of their crosses of ash” (245). This shocks Colonial Aureliano Buendia who regrets not continuing the war into final conclusion but, at the worst, foreign terrorism becomes institutionalized in Macondo leading the town towards another movement, far more terrible than the civil war.

A new space is created for the class struggle between the banana company, the bourgeoisie and the workers in the plantation, the proletariats. The workers start strike

with the demands for good sanitary conditions in their living quarters, decent medical services and better working conditions. The banana worker's struggle resembles with what Lenin wrote in *What is to be Done*, "The economic struggle is the collective struggle of the workers against their employers for better terms in the sale of their labor-power, for better living and working conditions" (35). The workers were paid in slips instead of cash and the slips could buy only "Virginia ham in the company commissaries" (306). The company, instead of fulfilling their simple demands, uses the lawyers to defy the workers' strike. The narrator notes, "The decrepit lawyers dressed in black who during other times had besieged Colonel Aureliano Buendia and who now were controlled by the banana company dismissed those demands with decisions that seemed like acts of magic" (306). The workers try to get their demands fulfilled but the management side foils their demands by using tricks one after another. The situation is a typical class struggle as defined by Marta Harnecker, "Class struggle is the confrontation which is produced between two antagonistic classes when they are struggling for their class interests" (31). The interest of the company and the interest of the workers clash with each other and hence the class struggle intensifies.

Mr. Brown, the superintendent of the company avoids any kind of interactions with the struggling workers using different kinds of subterfuges. Even the lawyers and court assist the establishment side and workers get more frustrated. The workers fail in their attempts one after another because both the economic base and political superstructure serve the interest of Banana Company. The base of the company has set the forces and relations of banana production in which the workers' labor is appropriated for the company's profit. Marx and Engels explain the bourgeois intention clearly in *A Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "But for the modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products that are based on class antagonism, on the exploitation of the many by a few" (23). The case with the Banana Company is exactly the same as claimed by Marx and Engels above. The company owners, the bourgeoisie want to accumulate more capital by exploiting the workers and the proletariat, on the other hand, struggle for more facilities. This antagonism takes the shape of never-ending class struggle and when the struggle takes chronic shape it results in violence, which is not unnatural.

The workers are outsmarted by the lawyers even in the high court. The legal case should be understood in the light of bourgeois superstructure. The legal system does serve the interest of the company owners, not the interest of the workers. Marquez wants to indicate that foreign investment is not a solution for Spanish America but a problem. Katherine J. Hampares too gives the same observation, "Economic imperialism has left the town worse off than it was before Herbert came; thus, false hope through foreign investment is exposed for what it is . . ." (116). When all legal and formal attempts are foiled one after another, by nature, the workers are compelled to take bigger steps.

The struggle then enters the second phase of the political struggle. Ivo K Feierabend, Rosalind Ferdinand and et al enlist six scales of political violence: resignation or dismissal of the officeholders, peaceful demonstration or strike, riot or assignation, large scale arrest and imprisonments, revolts and guerilla warfare (396). The workers' struggle is first limited to "resignation or dismissal of office holders" and, as it fails to fulfil the demand of the workers, they move to the second phase "peaceful demonstration or strike". The narrator describes the strike, "The great strike broke out. Cultivation stopped halfway, the fruit rotted on the trees and the hundred-twenty-car trains remained on the sidings. The idle workers overflowed the towns" (307). The violence reaches the third stage when the workers present themselves in riots. The narrator describes this stage, "They burned plantations and commissaries, tore up tracks to impede the passage of the trains that began to open their path with machine gun fire, and they cut telegraph and telephone wires" (308-9). The authorities of Macondo attempt to make negotiation but in vain because only the de facto authority, the banana company holds the decision power. Eventually, the army opens the fire and fourteen machine guns burst at once creating "a seismic voice, a volcanic breath, the roar of cataclysm broke out in the centre of the crowd with a great potential of expansion" (311). The army makes massacre in front of the railway station and the strike is totally crushed.

The massacre comes as the last resort of the company to suppress the strike because all its former efforts to foil the strikes failed. José Arcadio Segundo wakes up lying against dead bodies in the train and realizes that he has survived the massacre. While trying to run away from the train, he sees "the man corpses, woman corpses, child corpses who would be thrown into the sea like rejected bananas" (312). Arcadio Segundo jumps out of the car and walks the opposite direction of the train and reaches Macondo in three hours. A stranger woman nurses his head and José Arcadio Segundo mumbles:

"There must have been three thousands of them" he murmured.

"What?"

"The dead," he clarified. "It must have been all of the people who were at the station." (313).

When José Arcadio Segundo reaches home, he finds rumor spread by the authorities "There were not any dead." A contradiction appears in the surface: according to José Arcadio Segundo, there were three thousand dead but according to the company sources, there were no dead. The company makes a proclamation that two demands, medical reform and sanitary conditions were addressed and the holiday was declared for three days. The company exploits the media repeatedly saying there were no casualties. The official version was: "there were no dead, the satisfied workers had gone back to their families and the banana company was suspending all activity until the rain stopped" (315). The proletariats were completely crushed by the bourgeois and the latter used the entire state mechanism, the administration, the army, the media, etc. to suppress them.

The struggle between American imperialists and the proletarians in Macondo, as many critics claim, is dramatization from Colombian History. The strike against the United Fruit Company in 1928 is a fact of Colombian history. Posada- Carbo gives minute details, “. . . the army led by General Cortes Vargas took repressive measures on the eve of 6 December, which ended in bloodshed and persecution of the strikers and their leaders” (404). Critics refer to the interviews given by Marquez to relate Macondo with the novelist’s birthplace. In an interview given to Rita Guibert, Marquez spoke, “I was growing in Aracataca, where the United Fruit Company was established” (24). Posada-Carbo quotes Gerald Martin, “For Gerald Martin, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a socialist reading of Latin America’s history; the apocalyptic events of the banana strike are patently historical ones” (397-98). The critics are not in agreement about the number of casualties in the strike. The researcher is not concerned here with the number of dead people but the claim is that the banana massacre is the last stage of class struggle. The imperialists would have been killed had the workers been victorious in the struggle. The workers were the losers in the struggle and, as a result, as Laurence M. Porter claims, “all traces of the atrocity are so effectively concealed that it will go unmentioned in the history textbook” (204). The slogan “There were no dead” becomes general acceptance simply because the imperialists were dominant over the workers. It was the winner’s perspective that became official truth; it was the winner’s version of history that was recorded in books.

The struggle between these two sides, the establishment and the workers is what Marx defined as class struggle. The owners wanted to accumulate more capital from the plantation and in order to collect more capital, they curtailed the workers’ facilities. The capitalists can earn more only by appropriating the workers’ surplus labor. Their goal of accumulating more capital is threatened by the struggle of the workers. The capitalists come into a situation which is called “crisis” in Marxist terminology. They adopt different tricks to save themselves from the crisis. Mr. Brown’s tricks one after another and the lawyer's subterfuges are the attempts of crisis management but all these attempts are foiled by the workers. This is interpreted by Bell and Cleaver as “working-class produced crisis” (1). The railway station gunning is the extreme stage of class struggle and the capitalists are aided by other state apparatus, the army, media and the administration, for example.

The Banana Company did not have its own army and it’s the army from Macondo that fires at the workers and makes a massacre. The media helps in the circulation of message “there were no dead” and the administration of Macondo turns deaf ear to the incident. The army, the media and the administration are the part of the superstructure and they cannot go against the interest of the Banana Company. The relation between the company and the army in case of the strike seems similar to the comments on Latin American military made by Pregger-Roman, who remarks, “The Latin American military

establishments have usurped the power of the Latin American bourgeoisie even though they rule in its interests. But more, they rule in the interests of imperialists” (426). Both the military and administration of Macondo serve the interests of the banana company. The army in Macondo works for the favor of the company by killing the strikers and hiding their dead bodies. The army works as a faithful servant of the imperialists and the alliance between the government and the banana company try, in Martin’s words, to erase the proletarian history. Martin observes, “Nevertheless, as Garcia Marquez shows, all is not forgotten, First José Arcadio Segundo then Aureliano Babilonia, keep the memory of the workers’ struggle and their suppression alive” (231). Though not recorded in the official history, the history of the proletarians survives through the consciousness of people.

Macondo becomes vulnerable because of its own riches. It lures the foreigners because of its richness in natural resources, the viable climate for banana cultivation and the demand for the banana in the international market. Its richness ultimately proves ironical for the town’s fate. Macondo’s development and the arrival of the foreign capitalists correspond with many Latin American countries, where the foreign power especially North American companies entered in the name of industries and agriculture. James Higgins puts this concept in clear words, “In fact, the story of the later Macondo illustrates Latin America’s neocolonial status as an economic dependency of international capital, particularly North American” (73). British investment was followed by American investment in Latin America and the latter drained its resources beyond limitation that ultimately caused weather extremes. Higgins wants to suggest that the imperialistic situation in Macondo corresponds with the situation of Latin/Spanish American countries in the twentieth century. Latin America, as well as Macondo, suffered because of imperialistic intervention, which became decisive for the future of both Macondo as well as Latin/Spanish America.

The first good book ever published on imperialism is *Imperialism: A Study* by a J. A. Hobson. In this book, Hobson makes a comprehensive study of imperialism from antiquity to modernity. Hobson categorized imperialism in different forms and so far as the imperialism in Macondo is concerned, it falls under Hobson’s sub-division “Economic Parasites of Imperialism” (51). The American company did not come to Macondo to sell its finished products; its entry in Macondo was not for finding a new bazaar. It exploited the unbound natural resources of Macondo and cheap local human resources. The company fed on the resources of another country and the category of “economic parasite” seems quite convincing. The banana company usurps and controls Macondo’s resources and uses it for its private gain. Metaphorically, the parasites squeeze the resources of Macondo dry and prepare the ground ripe for class struggle.

Though Marx and Engels have made references of imperialism in their scattered works, it was Lenin, who defined imperialism from a Marxist perspective in his book

Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism. For Lenin, imperialism is a special stage of capitalism. Lenin observes:

Imperialism emerged as the development and direct continuation of the fundamental characteristics of capitalism in general. But capitalism only became capitalist imperialism at a definite and very high stage of its development, when certain of its fundamental characteristics began to change into their opposites when the features of the epoch of transition from capitalism to a higher social and economic system had taken shape and revealed themselves in all spheres. (91)

The mass production of the very larger-scale firms/industries creates a monopoly and this monopoly stage, according to Lenin is imperialism. He elucidates, “If it were necessary to give the briefest possible definition of imperialism we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism” (91). This is what happens in Macondo: the banana company has occupied all the land resources of Macondo and the workers have no other alternative for employment. The company monopolizes the resources of Macondo and makes the town dependent on it.

History has shown us that the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources invites apocalypse, the Mayan civilization for example in the Latin American context. Mayan apocalypse is repeated in Macondo after many centuries. The railway station massacre is followed by rain that continues for “four years eleven months and two days” (Solitude 320). The rain was followed by the hurricane “that scattered roofs about and knocked down walls and uprooted every last plant of the banana groves” (320). Then comes an absolute draught and it lasts for ten years. Marquez has used these natural vagaries in allegorical sense, as Ariel Dorfman puts forward, “in order to press upon his characters some proxy for history, experienced as if it were a deluge or an earthquake or a hurricane, something felt to be beyond the efforts of everyday men and women, somewhat like Rivera’s jungle” (82). Colombian José Eustasio Rivera’s novel *The Vortex* deals with jungle where men try to tame nature and make it subservient and bountiful.

Macondo’s natural resources are squeezed dry and the human resources are exploited to the extreme limitation by the Banana Company. The resistance becomes inevitable when anything reaches its climax. The strike and natural vagaries are examples of human and natural resistance in response to the limitless exploitation of resources. The exploitation of natural and human resource through capitalistic and imperialistic production system, thus, became the only cause of Macondo’s apocalypse. Marquez has given a warning, a prophetic view to the humanity about the sustainable use of human and natural resources.

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