



Tradition and Memory in Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude

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Abstract

The twentieth century has seen the most horrific disasters in the history of mankind. These disasters epistemological, political, social, economic, psychological etc. which the West has brought upon itself and the rest of the world have led many to question, and censure, the so-called Enlightenment project, which explicitly opposes the beliefs and norms of traditional societies including that of the pre-Enlightenment west itself. There has been a tremendous amount of research in all fields of knowledge and many theories have been put forward to explain how Enlightened Modernity came to challenge, defeat and disable the long-established life worlds of traditional societies.

Keywords: Marquez, tradition, God, Macondo, Religion

Introduction

Inhumanity is the unintended consequence of the modernization, capitalization and technologisation of any society. It is my prejudice against this inhumanity which has inspired me to try and analyse the conflict between tradition and progress in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and to contrast the traditional from the modern society as depicted in the novel highlighting the significance of memory in the process.

"Precisely the fact that today tradition must be invoked shows that it has lost its power¹."

I will limit my study and apply special emphasis on one particular event in the novel: the insomnia plague. The insomnia plague, with its origins uncertain, spreads throughout the village of Macondo and causes sleeplessness in all its inhabitants. The side-effect of this lasting sleeplessness is a loss of memory because of which all the villagers slowly start forgetting linguistic signifiers. As a solution they decide to write down on each thing its name and its particular function. This makes everything in the village merely functional, a mundane object for everyday use. This, as I will try to show, is how values in the traditional society lose their meaning. This is the loss of sacredness in a tradition. The language structure and hierarchy of meanings can only be preserved through memory and eradicated by forgetting. Modernisation, by several symbolic methods depicted in the novel, inflicts forgetfulness in the subjects of the traditional life world and replaces the traditional, sacred concepts with new instrumental ones and replaces the myth-religious metaphysics with materialistic ones. Thus the traditional worldview loses its sacredness and gradually fades away from the minds of its subjects and, therefore, from the life world itself².

The introduction of technology by the gypsies into the village, the deciphering of the parchments, the importing of the western political structure and the establishment of the banana company are all factors for the breakdown of tradition in the village of Macondo, but at the same time they are a consequence of the weakness in the tradition itself. The establishment of the village is based on guilt since Jose Arcadio Buendia and his wife, Ursula the founders of the village were married despite incest prohibition (they were first cousins). They broke away from their society and established Macondo, which later became a populated village. Marquez seems to suggest that a society founded on guilt is meant to end in disaster. But guilt presumes a well-established moral structure. It is when the guilt and the shame slowly fade away with the family lineage that the evidence for decadence becomes visible. Generation after generation, the Buendias forget the hierarchy of values, such as sin and virtue, God and devil, heaven and hell. It is this forgetting in the novel that will suggest what I will try to propose i.e. the survival of a particular mytho-religious worldview depends on repetition and remembrance of its fundamental concepts and their hierarchical positions in its established language structure by its subjects. Any disturbance in the structure causes fissures throughout the life world, and gradually destroys it.

Family History of South America

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's epic novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, narrates the family history of a native South American family, the Buendias. This narrative is not merely a genealogical fiction, but also a historical allegory and an autobiography at the same time. Not only does this novel belong to multiple genres but it has several themes as well, such as love, death, time, culture and nature, solitude, history, identity, progress, innocence etc. But the novel's greatness lies not in the vastness of its scope, nor in the novelty and poetically of its style but in

the universal validity of the ideas it puts forward. One such idea in the novel is that of "tradition". Marquez looks at tradition as opposed to progress while sketching his narrative of history where progress inevitably overcomes and either demolishes or mutates tradition permanently, and it does this by intruding and disturbing the individual and collective memory of the subjects of a tradition. The insomnia plague is just one of many events in the novel through which we can extract Marquez's concept of tradition, but due to limitations of space this analysis will focus for the most part on this particular event.

Jose Arcadio Buendia fell in love with his first cousin, Ursula Iguarin, and married her despite the prohibition of incest in their community. Driven by guilt Jose Arcadio Buendia travels with Ursula far away from his home and establishes a village in a remote isolated piece of land and names it Macondo. Soon they have children and the village is populated by other immigrants. Their lives revolve around a typical traditional lifestyle: man seeks living and brings it home, woman takes care of home and children, children grow up watching their parents and follow in their footsteps to keep the tradition alive. But the problem is that Jose Arcadio Buendia and Ursula did not keep the tradition alive. They broke away from it. Macondo is established because of a violation of the established normative structure; its doom is sealed in its beginning³.

One day an orphan relative, Rebecca, arrives at their house and the Indian woman warns the family that Rebecca carries symptoms of a grave disease called the insomnia plague:

"The Indian woman explained that the most fearsome part of the sickness of insomnia was not the impossibility of sleeping, for the body did not feel any fatigue at all, but its inexorable evolution toward a more critical manifestation: a loss of memory. She meant that when the sick person became used to this state of vigil, the recollection of his childhood began to be erased, then the name and notion of things, and finally the identity of people and even the awareness of his own being, until he sank into a kind of idiocy that had no past⁴."

The plague spreads throughout their home and eventually all over the village. People spend a long period of time without sleep. In the beginning they are glad to be inflicted by the plague because, "there was so much to do in Macondo in those days that there was barely enough time" to sleep⁵. But soon they become frustrated with staying awake because there are few ways of spending their time, so they try exhausting themselves but to no avail. They have to quarantine the town so the town becomes completely cut off from the rest of the world. Soon, since there is no other option, the villagers accept their fate and life resumes normally and sleeping comes to be considered as a "useless habit".

It is interesting to note here that the village has obviously developed the capitalist spirit. The villagers appreciate the fact that they have lost the capacity to sleep. They see sleep as a

weakness. They ignore the fact that sleeping at night is a natural, not to mention, a traditional activity. This is because they see time as money. The more time they have to work, the more capital they can produce. But who could blame them if they forget the meaning of natural or traditional? This is precisely what has happened. It is not the desire of maximizing capital that makes them glad to be sleepless, but rather the fact they have forgotten the very purpose of work itself. Their conception of work has changed from the traditional – working to earn enough to fulfil their needs – to the modern – working to increase capital for the sake of increasing capital. They have forgotten an old value which has been replaced by a new one.

Focus on Tradition

A tradition is based on the hierarchies of opposite values, such as, Sin/Virtue, Good/Evil, and Work/Home etc. But all these oppositions form one meta-opposition: sacred/mundane, and this determines the stability of a tradition. All hierarchies are established within a language⁶. They are arranged and ordered within the memory of the subject by historical and cultural experience. In all traditional societies Home is a concept considered above or higher than work, so that work is done in order to serve the requirements of the home; work works for the home. In a capitalist society the subjects are made to forget this hierarchy and gradually, unconsciously it is reversed in their collective memory, so that work becomes an end in itself; work works for itself. The change of such hierarchical orders is a gradual and historical process and is brought about by repetition. Repetition is the fuel of memory. Only that which is repeated is sustained and the rest is slowly forgotten, erased from the conscious memory.

As the insomnia gets worse, amnesia begins to take over the village and gradually, all the inhabitants start forgetting the names of things and their use. As a solution, Jose Arcadio Buendia writes the names and use of things on pieces of papers and pastes them onto those things. For example:

"The sign that he hung on the neck of the cow was... This is a cow. She must be milked in the morning so that she will produce milk, and milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk⁴."

The cow is a living animal and the villagers use it to produce and utilize milk. But in a traditional society, with its historical and metaphysical groundings, the cow is more than just an instrumental object; the cow is a part of the life world of the society; the cow is sacred. By the forgetting of the sacredness of the cow the villagers have reduced it to a tool; they have rendered it mundane. This is just one example of the countless many in the novel portraying the loss of historical and traditional meanings of things; loss of their sacredness. This loss is not only limited to things, but is destructive to the entire established worldview.

Pre-modern societies, unlike the modern society, have the quality of understanding and explaining the world and its phenomena through another world. This is what makes their worldview sacred. They believe in a higher, greater reality of which this world is a part. To forget this other world, this greater reality, means to have erased the normative structure of the tradition from the mind altogether, and, most importantly, it means to have lost the historical and traditional identity that the subject had been endowed with. The significance of memory lies in the fact that it not only orders values but also defines the self as well as the other. The self can only be established once it's predetermined position and status in the socio-historical network has been internalised. The sacredness of the other and the other world is vital for the survival of a tradition⁷.

In Macondo during the insomnia plague, the inhabitants not only lose their memories, but consequently their identities as well. They lose the sense of who they were and what they are meant to do. They only read the signs and acted according to them. They become like androids or cyborgs. Not only do they forget their self-identities, but they also forget the identities of those around them, and the only way to identify a family member is by mere description, "Where a father was remembered faintly as a dark man who had arrived at the beginning of April and a mother was remembered only as the dark woman who wore a gold ring on her left hand⁹."

Pilar Ternera, who used to be a fortune teller before the plague, began telling their pasts to the people rather than their futures since no one was interested in their future. They could make no use of their future if they do not remember who they were. The future is meaningless without a past.

Jose Arcadio Buendia feared that the village in its amnesia would forget God, so on the main street they put up the sign 'GOD EXISTS'. But to know that God exists is not the same as knowing the sacredness of His existence. This is what the novel criticizes in its depiction of the modern world. As a society progresses everything in it becomes a mere function, an empty form, nothing more than a word and its instruction. It is a world lacking memory, identity and communication. Consequently it is a world lacking history.

History is the essence of tradition. Tradition proceeds within a historical framework and its origin is situated within this framework. The primary reason for the disruption of the traditional life of Macondo is that Macondo is built on the breaking away from a previous tradition. The founders of Macondo, Jose Arcadio Buendia and Ursula, are in complicity of incest. Like Adam and Eve they and their children must wander out of their original home for their sin until the Last Day; until the Apocalypse which is predetermined and inevitable, written in the parchments that the last member of their lineage deciphers as is written in the parchments. Fate was perhaps never this obvious and subtle at the same time. It is this history which lasts within the memories of Jose Arcadio

Buendia and Ursula in the form of guilt. It is this guilt, this sin, forgetting which, the future generations absolve themselves of the fear of impending doom; of shame; of the will to repent, and finally repeat the sin of their parents. It is this absolving itself from guilt and shame that the modern society manages to incinerate its former, traditional ethical system⁸. Without the shame of sin there remains no virtue, no sacredness of the Good. Thus the traditional subject is cut off from its history and, consequently, loses its future.

The loss of memory also results in the loss of the concept of time. Time exists only in memory. There can be no such thing as time immemorial. The narration of the insomnia plague from beginning till the end does not mention the time period it lasted, because the narration talks about loss of memory and hence loss of time, there can be no record of the time during the plague. In other words, the time period of the insomnia plague cannot be determined because it cannot be recorded since memory is lost. For Marquez, in the novel, time is one whole. The beginning and the end, the past, present and future are all past and eternally proceeding as the same instance. Events recur, as Ursula says,

"I know all of this by heart... It is as if time has turned around and we were back at the beginning⁴."

This is because the mechanistic lifestyle, inflicted by industrialization, gives the characters a mechanistic conception of time, like a pendulum, constantly in motion, yet never moving from its place, as Jose Arcadio Buendia notes:

"What day is today?" Aureliano told him that it was Tuesday. "I was thinking the same thing," Jose Arcadio Buendia said, "but suddenly I realised that it's still Monday, like yesterday...." One the next day, Wednesday, Jose Arcadio Buendia went back to the workshop. "This is a disaster," he said. "Look at the air, listen to the buzzing of the sun, the same as yesterday and the day before. Today is Monday too⁹."

This is the realisation "that all forms of evolution and chronological succession had existed only in the mind¹⁰." This is the realisation of the illusion of progress. As Voltaire once said, "the more it changes, the more it stays the same." Notions of time, history, identity and God, all fade away from the memories of the inhabitants of Macondo. They even put up signs on pieces of paper in their houses for memorizing feelings so that they remember which situation arouses what sort of feeling. Their very reality becomes endangered of running into oblivion once they forgot the meaning of letters; once they forgot how to read.

Here the genius of Marquez captures yet another hierarchy of the opposition between speech and writing. Until the post-modern era speech has almost unanimously been given priority over writing. It is only the western tradition that has preserved itself entirely in writing. All other ancient tradition were wary of

the written, not only because speech has a closer, more direct relation to thought and memory, but also because tradition must be taught, learned and preserved within the phenomenon of the human self. There is little room for (mis)interpreting a person's words in person, but a greater chance of (mis)interpreting a written text. Tradition requires conservation of meaning for its stability. Writing is also a failure of memory. One writes when one fails to memorise. When Aureliano Buendia, Jose Arcadio Buendia's son, learns what a "stake" is he writes it down. "In that way he was sure of not forgetting it in the future. It did not occur to him that this was the first manifestation of a loss of memory, because the object had a difficult name to remember⁴." The history of the West has been inherited in writing, and therefore is interpreted radically, seen from a new point of view in every age. The non-western, traditional societies see their history at work within their cultural rituals and their texts of origin are interpreted within their historical contexts as they have been narrated to them in inheritance as *praxis*, and thus there are no revolutions in traditional societies; there is no flexibility. Such a tradition either survives in its essence or it dies out; its sacredness is either preserved in the memory or is forgotten¹¹.

Another important role of memory in the novel is its relation to war. In the beginning the people of Macondo manage their affairs by mutual consultation. They do not own arms and never divide themselves into groups. This used to be the traditional, sacred way of dealing with communal problems. The contact with the outside, advancing world forces Macondo to import arms and its modern political structure. The people become divided into two parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives and wage war all over the continent against each other. Colonel Aureliano Buendia becomes a legend of the war but soon comes to realise the meaninglessness of the war, because it is not his war; he has no memories of enmity with anyone. The final consequence of fighting thirty-two wars without ever rendering a sacred purpose to any of them, Colonel Aureliano Buendia develops an unimaginably mundane sense of reality. He becomes lost in solitude. Nothing remains sacred to him. "Watch out for your heart Aureliano," his friend warns him, "you're rotting alive⁴." He forgets the sacredness of values of Love and Life and even Death becomes meaningless to him and he conceives of time in the same manner as all the other Buendias: ever moving like a pendulum, in still motion. "How awful," he says, "the way time passes!" "It's just that war has done away with everything¹²." A war fought in particular history by a people of a different history strikes blows on the fighters themselves⁴.

The result of the breakdown of the traditional way of life and modernisation of Macondo is that in the end its inhabitants, particularly the Buendia family, are thrown into an abyss of solitude and alienation that lasts till the end of their lives. The import of modern technology brings such drastic changes in the life world that they are left bedazzled, caught in between the

dregs of their crippled tradition and the illusion of a utopian worldview.

"It was 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 none knew for certain where the limits of reality lay¹³."

This loss of reality, of tradition, of identity has its roots in the loss of history and memory. Not only do they forget, during the insomnia plague and after, but they forget that they have forgotten, so they never make any attempt to remember, nor even to create their past.

Unless communities and nations preserve their histories once again into individual memories, the insomnia plague may become a prophecy come true. As David W. Blight suggests⁹. "Memory, this story implies, is at the heart of our humanity."

Conclusion

On top of that their future is predestined and doomed to ruin, which they do not realise until the very end. Memory is significant in establishing and maintaining a historically valid and traditional way of life. To remember the sacred concepts within the worldview and distinguish them from the mundane is essential for promoting the normative framework of that tradition. As the insomnia plague reduced Macondo to a machine and its inhabitants to automatons, so does technologisation and capitalisation reduce the sacredness of traditional and religious concepts and replace them by pseudo-sacred ideals. Writing contributes to this weakening of collective memory and the capitalist system encourages it especially through academic institutions. The novel seems to warn us that if this continues, in the future those who control and generate texts will determine history.

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