

Magic of Márquez

The death of the masterful Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez marks the end of an era for not just Latin American and Caribbean literature but world literature as a whole. Few authors have the capacity to emote with readers across cultural, contextual, spatial and temporal barriers. Translated into dozens of languages, García Márquez's rich oeuvre of Spanish fiction and non-fiction touched a special chord by rendering everyday events and relationships fascinating.

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, García Márquez is best remembered for popularising the Latin American tradition of 'magic realism' that weaved fantasy and fairy tale-like possibilities into ordinary struggles and tribulations of rural folk. Fondly addressed as Gabito or Gabo in Latin America, his towering work *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) has characters who perform surrealistic and superhuman feats of defying gravity, surviving natural calamity and receiving ghosts.

García Márquez endowed characters with science-fictional qualities to drive home the absurdity of living through oppressive and deceitful dictatorships in Latin America. He was an inveterate critic of Western-backed authoritarian regimes which plundered the Latin subcontinent throughout the 19th and 20th centuries by inverting reality and subverting human decency.

The atrocities committed on peasants in *Latifundias*— large landed estates and plantations owned by feudal lords and Western corporations— with the complicity of local dictatorial governments was the political backdrop for García Márquez to imagine wildly about situations where lay people overcome the severe constraints and perform miracles and wonders. Magic realism was not escapism to make readers forget the miseries but a powerful reminder of the radical potential inherent in all human beings to shake off the shackles that bind them.

It is rare among the breed of writers to narrate deeply personal family histories and local histories of nondescript places and yet make them microcosms of what was happening to Latin America and much of the developing world before and during the Cold War. Elaborate descriptions of interpersonal relationships and local community behaviour could easily remain stuck with nitty gritty and lose sight of the bigger canvas.

What García Márquez did was to interweave the superstitious bedtime stories of grandmothers with the fate of the whole of Latin America that was undergoing spells of state terror, armed uprisings and aristocratic domination. As the American feminist writer Carol Hanisch held, "the personal is political". None was a better exponent of it in the Spanish language than García Márquez.

Gabo was a true revolutionary thinker who believed in the unity of all Latin American peoples irrespective of narrow nation-state boundaries. In *The Art of Fiction* (1981), he says, "In Latin America I don't have a sense of frontiers or borders. I'm conscious of the differences that exist from one country to another, but in my mind and heart it is all the same." One could expand this notion to the entire decolonised world, where readers in Asia and Africa could identify in Gabo's writings similar patterns of colonially constructed artificial concepts that kept people divided and weak.

As an intellectual who witnessed the worst excesses of civil wars and Western-backed military junta rule in Latin America, García Márquez drew skillful portraits of ruthless army officers who played with the lives of their hapless citizens. In *Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), he managed to carve out what he called "a synthesis of all the Latin American dictators" through the character named 'the general' who rules forever and clings to power at all costs. The grand illusion that people genuinely love 'the general' and the tricks the tyrant uses to ward off challenges to his absolute power are as applicable to Latin American *caudillos* as to a Saddam Hussein or a Muammar Qaddafi.

García Márquez's *Clandestine in Chile* (1986) exposed the brutality of the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet and highlighted the role of underground resistance movements of youth who were mobilising for his overthrow. This book was banned by military juntas and 15000 copies of it were publicly burnt by customs authorities in the Chilean city of Valparaíso. García Márquez was an epitome of the courageous literary genius in the face of impunity. His philosophy that one "could not remain silent in the face of injustice and repression" alarmed totalitarian regimes and endeared him to the masses.

The close comradeship which García Márquez developed with Fidel Castro and his outspoken views against Yankee imperialism in Latin America made him a hated figure within the US establishment during the Cold War. An official travel ban on him to enter America lasted for three decades until 1995.

Today, Latin America is free from despots who used to massacre citizens to "reestablish public order" on behalf of foreign patrons. Conservative oligarchies are also passé. But the independence and resurgence of the region can only be sustained by reading and re-reading García Márquez's chronicles of how it had suffered and endured in dark times.

From a purely literary point of view, García Márquez was a great innovator. His novelistic plots often have non-linear time flows, where anecdotes and episodes are organised haphazardly going forward and backward in time. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) begins with what one normally associates with the climax and then unwinds in the reverse direction. Some of García Márquez's works have exceedingly long sentences and passages divided just by commas, with no paragraphing or structured full stops. The unpredictability of prose and the erratic nature of the storyline one associates with contemporary writers like Salman Rushdie is an original trademark of García Márquez.

The novelist Amitav Ghosh has hailed Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, R.K. Narayan and Prem Chand as the rarest of rare writers who "spill over linguistic and regional barriers and seep into the soil of the entire (Indian) subcontinent." In Africa, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka were likewise literary giants who could encapsulate the aspirations and failures of their whole continent at crucial inflection points in its history without overtly setting out to do so.

García Márquez is in the same league for the Latin American subcontinent, which he described as a "source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty." Adios Gabo, universal litterateur and presenter of the dynamics that shaped the emergence of the Latin peoples.

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