

## Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude as a Grotesque Magical Realist Text

Hatice Elif Diler<sup>1</sup>

Received Date: 01 / 02 / 2015

Accepted Date: 01 / 04 / 2015

### **Abstract**

*Since the 1960s magical realism has been a significant narrative mode used by postmodernist and postcolonial authors all over the world. Disregarding the conventional classical realism and its techniques, magical realist authors have used postmodernist techniques to achieve their postcolonial aims. Their attempts to find innovative techniques have resulted in embracing the Rabelaisian aesthetics and Bakhtinian concerns in their works. Grotesque realism is considered a type of magical realism. Thanks to the embrace of the magical, the improbable and the profane, grotesque magical realist texts reflect a strong regenerative carnivalesque spirit and a general worldview in popular carnival forms. The most renowned exponent of magical realism from Latin America is Gabriel García Márquez, the winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize in literature. One Hundred Years of Solitude, the Colombian author García Márquez's magnum opus, is generally regarded as the masterpiece of magical realism. One Hundred Years of Solitude employs carnivalesque-grotesque features and stands out for its carnivalesque spirit. To convey his message, García Márquez mostly relies on Bakhtinian concerns such as folklore, folk laughter and carnivalesque. The aim of this study is to analyze the carnivalesque-grotesque features used in the novel and their contribution to García Márquez's meaning. Thus, this paper attempts to scrutinize One Hundred Years of Solitude as a grotesque magical realist text.*

**Keywords:** Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Grotesque Magical Realism, Carnivalesque-grotesque, postcolonialism

### **1. Introduction**

After World War II, the field of literature witnessed the advent and development of postmodernism and postcolonialism as two important literary movements. As "a historical product of the discourses of modernism and colonialism" (Irvine, 1998), magical realism has been a widely-used narrative mode persisting in the center of postmodernism and postcolonialism. Magical realism, as a hybrid narrative mode, amalgamates binary antagonisms such as real and imaginary, physical and spiritual, life and death, male and female. By equally merging realistic elements with fantastic, magical, and mythic ones in a realistic environment, this multicultural mode transposes the boundaries between the oppositions and provides the proximity of them. Owing to this feature of the mode, magical realism is regarded as a powerful weapon of political, social and cultural subversion. As proposed by Zamora and Faris (1995), "magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures" (p. 6). Although magical realism, because of its subversive power, has been preferred especially by postcolonial authors from the 'peripheral' regions of Western culture such as Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, it has also affected many European men of letters. Thus, magical realism, as "a strange seductiveness" in Jameson's terms (1986, p. 302), has proved to be an international mode used in miscellaneous forms all over the world. As

<sup>1</sup> Dr., Dumlupınar University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Western Languages and Literature, KÜ-TAHYA/TURKEY, [elifdiler\\_1@hotmail.com](mailto:elifdiler_1@hotmail.com)

a result of this diversity, different types of magical realism such as 'mythical', 'metaphysical', 'scholarly', 'anthropological', 'ontological', and 'epistemological' have emerged.

Magical realist authors have ignored traditional realism and attempted to use innovative techniques. As a result of their attempts, they have embraced the Rabelaisian aesthetics and applied the Russian literary critic Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's considerations about the 'carnavalesque-grotesque' and grotesque realism in their texts. Brenda Cooper (2004) explains that "the embrace of magic, and of the improbable and the blasphemous has led to the excavation of Mikhail Bakhtin and the carnivalesque, of the cacophony of discordant voices and the profane body" (p. 23). Thus, grotesque realism has become one of the most efficient types of magical realism. As they use the magical, the unbelievable, the profane, exaggeration, and narrative gigantism, grotesque magical realist texts reflect the nonofficial, anti-feudal, anti-political and anti-ecclesiastical spirit of the carnivals of the Middle Ages. By the help of their carnivalesque spirit, they can easily fight against all structures of power, customs, canons, fixed standards, prohibitions and restrictions, fundamentalism, ferocity, and racism.

The Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which was originally published as *Cien años de soledad* in Argentina in 1967, has been regarded as one of the greatest magical realist texts reflecting a strong regenerative carnivalesque spirit in world literature. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "the greatest Latin American novel of all time" (Swanson, 1995, p. 9) and "the world's first truly 'global' novel" (Martin, 2008, p. xix), García Márquez efficiently blends realistic and fantastic elements, deriving his material from oral and written traditions and making much use of carnivalesque-grotesque features. Through these features, the novel approaches to Medieval and Renaissance grotesque realist fiction and gets stronger in its social, political and cultural struggle. The aim of this study is to investigate the way in which García Márquez uses the carnivalesque-grotesque features in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the way in which these features contribute to the author's sociopolitical discussion. Considering the general characteristics of grotesque magical realist fiction, this paper attempts to analyze *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a grotesque magical realist text.

## 2. Grotesque Magical Realism

As well as the other typologies of the mode such as 'mythical', 'ontological', 'anthropological', 'scholarly', and 'epistemological', grotesque realism is considered a type of magical realism. According to Jeanne Delbaere-Garant (1995), the narrative mode has three types: psychic, mythic and grotesque. In Delbaere-Garant's definition, 'grotesque realism' is a combination of Latin American baroque, North American tall tale, and Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque'. In magical realist texts, in which magical elements are blended with mythic ones, magical and "grotesque elements are used to convey the anarchic eccentricity of popular tellers who tend to amplify and distort reality to make it more credible" and 'grotesque realism' is thus "used not just for popular oral discourse but also for any sort of hyperbolic distortion that creates a sense of strangeness through the confusion or interpenetration of different realms like animate / inanimate or human / animal. [...] 'grotesque realism' recalls Bakhtin's carnival body" (p. 256).

As understood from Delbaere-Garant's ideas, it is possible to define grotesque magical realism referring to Mikhail M. Bakhtin's ideas. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin scrutinizes the sociopolitical effects of folk culture and carnivals of the medieval times drawing on the French

author François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, which was published in the sixteenth century. Bakhtin emphasizes the significance of folk laughter and folk humor based on laughter in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Owing to its two vital properties "its indissoluble and essential relation to freedom" and "its relation to the people's unofficial truth" (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 89-90), folk laughter created "its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, and its own state versus the official state" (p. 88), fought against ferocity, solemnity, and horror inspired by ecclesiastical and political powers, and revolted against all restrictions during carnival festivities and rituals of the medieval times. For Bakhtin, carnivals, shaped by folk laughter, were not like official, feudal, and ecclesiastical ceremonials because they emphasized "nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world and a second life outside officialdom" (p. 6).

For Bakhtin, folk laughter and the culture of folk humor have a direct relationship with the creation of grotesque imagery. Grotesque images, which are "ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics", reflect "a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming" (pp. 24-25). For him, grotesque images cannot be understood without considering the defeat of fear. While people try to laugh at fear, "the awesome becomes a 'comic monster'. [...] All that was terrifying becomes grotesque" (p. 91). Then, according to Bakhtin, "its folklore source" (p. 307) is an important aspect of grotesque. Together with its folklore source, 'ambivalence' is another vital feature of the grotesque image as it reflects "both pole of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis" (p. 24).

According to Bakhtin, material bodily principle and degradation principle are two essential principles of grotesque realism. Material bodily principle requires the use of "the images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life" presented in exaggerated forms. These exaggerated images are extremely positive, amiable, and cheerful as they are "the heritage [...] of the culture of folk humor" (p. 18). Emphasizing the concepts of "fertility, growth and a brimming-over abundance" (p. 19), they reflect all people. Degradation principle requires the reducing of all that is abstract, unworldly, and supreme. In Bakhtin's definition,

Degradation [...] means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (p. 21)

Bakhtin combines degrading and regenerating aspects of grotesque as "carnival-grotesque" (p. 34). In grotesque realism, carnival-grotesque represents life as a complete whole without separating death from birth. It harbingers the birth of the new in the face of the death of the old. Accordingly, it expresses people's hope for an enhanced life and a better future.

Referring to Bakhtin's thoughts, David K. Danow, in his *The Spirit of Carnival* (1995), investigates Latin American magical realism with respect to its carnivalesque spirit. For Danow magical realism depicts an optimistic vision of life and thus, mirrors a "bright carnivalesque" (p. 9) spirit. By the help of its bright, life-enhancing carnivalesque spirit, Latin American magical realism "laughs", "gazes in joy and wonder" and "appreciates the vast potential for surprise in the

world, relative to man's place within it" (p. 10). As death in magical realism is perceived from Bakhtin's point of view, it allows for a new better life. That is why, for Danow, "what Bakhtin has to say about medieval and Renaissance grotesque, with its attendant regenerative laughter, bears greatly on Latin American magical realism" (p. 40).

As understood from the explanations above, magical realism is much obliged to grotesque realism. Furthermore, grotesque realism can also be considered a strong type of magical realism. With its affinity to folk culture and with its cheerful and renewing carnivalesque spirit that fights against conventional value systems with the aim of producing new ones, today's magical realism is exactly equivalent to grotesque realism of the medieval and Renaissance times.

### 3. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a Grotesque Magical Realist Text

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez proficiently applies magical realism blending fantasy and reality and drawing from both oral and written traditions. The reflections of old-fashioned oral story-telling, Euro-American Modernist methods, and African, American Indian, Spanish-Galician and Colombian lore are deeply felt throughout his novel: "folk culture, including oral storytelling, reminiscences from old Indian culture, currents from Spanish baroque in different epochs, influences from European surrealism and other modernism are blended into a spiced and life-giving brew" (Award Ceremony Speech, 1982) in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. With this rich combination, the novel gets the power to reflect the universal through the local. According to Higgins (2002), García Márquez attempts to challenge Western novelistic tradition firmly using it. Thus, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* depicts

[...] the relativity of all worldviews, for events that appear fantastic to the sophisticated reader - Remedios's ascent into heaven, trips on flying carpets, the parish priest's feats of levitation - are accepted as everyday realities in the cultural environment of Macondo, and, by contrast, the modern technology that the sophisticated reader takes for granted -ice cubes, false teeth, the locomotive- is greeted with awe as something wonderful and magical. *Cien Años* thus not only challenges assumptions as to what constitutes reality but subverts the novelistic genre's conventional Eurocentrism and, indeed the whole rationalist cultural tradition of the West. (p. 39)

As understood from the quotation, by combining Latin American and Euro-American techniques and elements, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* attempts to challenge and subvert not only Western literary and cultural traditions but also Latin Americans' perceptions of their own history and culture. Therefore, it may be suggested that *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by the help of its narrative mode, functions as a means of subversion.

García Márquez (2006) regards literature as "the best plaything that had ever been invented to make fun of people" (p. 388) in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. True to the author's idea on literature, it may be proposed that his novel is, "first of all, a comic novel, an entertainment, which adopts an irreverent attitude toward literature [...] as something not to be taken seriously" (Higgins, p. 37). García Márquez has always had "a sense of humour and a Cervantine sense of irony" (Martin, 155). His novel reflects his strong sense of humour and irony. As "one of literature's great humorists, a genius of comic ribaldry in the best traditions of Rabelais" (Bell-Villada, 1990, p. 13), García Márquez, in his novel, relies mostly on "the Rabelaisian aesthetic" and "Bakhtinian concerns" (Bell-Villada, 2002, p. 16) such as folk laughter, folk culture and carnivalesque. His type of magical realism, "with its outrageous humor and endless irony that grow from a solid and well-rooted commonsense folk wisdom and political radicalism" (Bell-Villada, 1990, p. 67), gets

inspiration from Medieval and Renaissance grotesque realism. According to Bell-Villada, it is impossible to deny Rabelais's effects on García Márquez: "from the comical, lowlife, late-medieval universe of François Rabelais in *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel* he learned ways of giving verbal shape to the more plebeian side of our humanity, to irreverence, ribaldry, and burlesque" (p. 78). As suggested by Bell-Villada, García Márquez has never concealed his veneration for Rabelais. In the last chapter of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez salutes Rabelais through the character Gabriel, who directly represents the author himself: Gabriel "won the contest and left for Paris with two changes of clothing, a pair of shoes, and the complete works of Rabelais" (García Márquez, p. 404).

Literary gigantism is one of the techniques that García Márquez borrowed from Rabelais. In his writing García Márquez generally makes much use of hyperboles. His literary gigantism derives from the magical reality of Latin America:

[...] disproportion also forms part of reality in Latin America, with its rivers so wide one often cannot see across them, and its earthquakes and tempests the likes of which are not seen in Europe. 'Hurricane' in fact is a word of Caribbean Indian origin, and there have been recorded instances of South American rainstorms that go on for months. [...] To convey this disproportionate reality the folk imagination of García Márquez in turn further exaggerates, tells history as a tall tale. (Bell-Villada, 1990, pp. 12-13)

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, another characteristic borrowed from Rabelais is the carnivalesque-grotesque use of numbers. The novel is full of large, overstated numbers. García Márquez's numbers are known for their arithmetical exactitude like Rabelais's exaggerated exact numbers. For García Márquez, the use of such carnivalesque, grotesque numbers and their arithmetical exactitude provide defamiliarization and render fantasy believable. He explains his ideas as follows:

If you say that there are elephants flying in the sky, people are not going to believe you. But if you say that there are four hundred and twenty-five elephants in the sky, people will probably believe you. [...] When I was very small there was an electrician who came to the house. I became very curious because he carried a belt with which he used to suspend himself from the electrical posts. My grandmother used to say that every time this man came around, he would leave the house full of butterflies. But when I was writing this, I discovered that if I didn't say that the butterflies were yellow, people would not believe it. (García Márquez, quoted in Darraj, 2006, p. 24)

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the author mentions rains that last "for four years, eleven months, and two days," (p. 315). The character Úrsula guesses her age as "between one hundred fifteen and one hundred twenty-two," (p. 342) and Pilar Ternera as "one hundred forty-five" (p. 395). The exaggerated numbers in these examples are all unfinished, ambiguous and incomplete like the grotesque body which is always in the process of becoming. Thus, they not only produce a comic effect but also support Rabelais's grotesque theme of "death-renewal-fertility" (Bakhtin, p. 327) and emphasize the completeness and continuousness of life. Moreover, the material bodily principle and degradation principle, as two vital principles of grotesque realism, are carefully applied by the author in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. As mentioned above, the grotesque images of material bodily lower stratum such as food, drink, the genital organs of the body, and

defecation all derive from folk humor and culture: “all the images of the material bodily lower stratum [...] debase, destroy, regenerate, and renew simultaneously. They are blessing and humiliating at the same time. [...] On the other hand, these images are closely linked to laughter” (p. 151). Like Rabelais, García Márquez persistently jokes with phallus, anus, breasts, urine, and feces. In the following example the images of eating and food are combined with the images of the genital organs:

While he would rub Amaranta Úrsula's erect breasts with egg whites or smooth her elastic thighs and peach-like stomach with cocoa butter, she would play with Aureliano's portentous creature as if it were a doll and would paint clown's eyes on it with her lipstick and give it a Turk's mustache with her eyebrow pencil, and would put on organza bow ties and little tinfoil hats. One night they daubed themselves from head to toe with peach jam and licked each other like dogs and made mad love on the floor of the porch, and they were awakened by a torrent of carnivorous ants who were ready to eat them alive. (García Márquez, p. 406)

García Márquez may employ obscene, indecent, and profane elements, but his work is undoubtedly free from triviality, immorality and crudity. In the novel, all the images of the material bodily lower stratum “celebrate life in all its manifestations and take joy in what are normally considered the least noble aspects, the animal side of human existence” (Bell-Villada, 1990, p. 79).

The public sphere of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* includes circuses, celebrations, carnivals, marketplaces, church festivities, school parties, and main squares, all of which are effective on the social and political life in the fictional town Macondo. The function of these festivities and gathering places of the novel is the same as that of the marketplaces of the medieval and Renaissance times. For Bakhtin the marketplace of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was “the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained ‘with the people’” (p. 154). Following Rabelais's method García Márquez lets his characters come together in such rituals, carnivals and gathering places, as a result of which he destroys the social class hierarchy and grants people freedom. He chooses especially carnivals and circuses to convey his ethical, social and political criticism. Circuses, as the contemporary prolongation and, in some ways, imitation of traditional carnivals, represent “the return for communal origins” (Gutiérrez Mouat, 1988, p. 23). García Márquez tries to attract attention to the importance of circuses within the human domain. In the following example the arrival of a circus to Macondo is described “as a moment of epiphany” (Danow, p. 55):

Santa Sofía de la Piedad dropped what she was doing in the kitchen and ran to the door. “It's the circus,” she shouted. Instead of going to the chestnut tree, Colonel Aureliano Buendía also went to the street door and mingled with the bystanders who were watching the parade. He saw a woman dressed in gold sitting on the head of an elephant. He saw a sad dromedary. He saw a bear dressed like a Dutch girl keeping time to the music with a soup spoon and a pan. He saw the clowns doing cartwheels at the end of the parade. (García Márquez, p. 267)

One of García Márquez's tools to deal with some moral issues providing the veracity and continuity of societies has been circuses and people working for circuses. To reproach unethical behaviours and attitudes, he employs freaks of nature exhibited in the freak shows of circuses as

Diler, H.E. (2015). Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a grotesque magical realist text. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research*, 1 (2), 489-496.

seen in the examples: José Arcadio watches the show of “the man who had been turned into a snake for having disobeyed his parents” (p. 32) and the woman “who must have her head chopped off every night at this time for one hundred and fifty years as punishment for having seen what she should not have” (p. 33). As circuses are depicted as the places of moral education, José Arcadio Buendía accepts his son's leaving Macondo to join a circus thinking “that way he'll learn to be a man” (p. 34).

As an author with leftish liberal ideas, García Márquez has always had a political side with the oppressed against the oppressor and fought against injustice, oppression, militarism, dictatorship, totalitarianism, and exploitation. His sociopolitical and religious satire and irony, as “the basis of criticism for testing and contesting moral and ethical values” (Pelayo, 2009, p. 75), are deeply felt in the representation of life throughout the novel. In his satire, which is never of malevolent, offensive or bitter type, he generally utilizes grotesque gigantism. For instance, while describing the arrival of the railroad – thus, the advent of imperialist capitalism – he satirizes Mr. Herbert's high Yankee technology applying grotesque gigantism that functions to condemn neo-colonialism. According to Bell-Villada (1990), García Márquez's satire and his fidelity to folk culture reveal “his larger belief in the possibility of a better world” (p. 80). To be able to realize his belief, he satirically portrays capitalists, oligarchs, politicians, U.S. imperialists, dictators and the clergy in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Through such satirical portraits, the novel challenges the established social and political order, bureaucratic mentality, and tyrannical regimes to provide correction and improvement.

To sum up, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* successfully combines the features of carnivalesque, folk culture, Latin American baroque, and North American tall tale. Thanks to these features, it approaches to Medieval and Renaissance grotesque realist fiction. The novel reveals a universal view of life in the popular carnival forms. Depending on folk laughter, folk lore and folk culture, it reflects a sense of fiesta with its carnivals, festivities, marketplaces, rituals, circuses and gathering-places that are typically the representations of a world upside down and vehemently necessitate a reconstructed and reformed world. Supporting the idea of wholeness and continuity of life, its dualistic worldview attempts to terminate the borders between the official and unofficial, to obliterate all hierarchic differences and to trespass all prohibitions and restrictions. The use of the Rabelaisian aesthetics and Bakhtinian ideas attract attention as García Márquez's primary concerns providing the sociopolitical and postcolonial criticism in the novel. By the help of these interests *One Hundred Years of Solitude* tries to defy and overthrow all types of the disorders of injustice, ferocity and chaos and deflate all official truths. Owing to its author's dynamic sense of humour and irony and its carnivalesque-grotesque features, the novel reflects a forceful recovering and renewing carnivalesque spirit. Through its optimistic, cheerful, and life-enhancing carnivalesque-grotesque spirit, it grows stronger as a sociopolitical weapon, offers new opportunities for a better world and life creating its own church, its own state and its own world as opposed to the official church, state and world.

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