



# Echoes of Silence: Disillusionment and The Elusive Truth in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel*

**Rongsennungla Pongen,**  
Research Scholar  
English Department  
Nagaland University  
Kohima, India

**Dr I. Talisenla Imsong**  
Assistant Professor  
English Department  
Nagaland University  
Kohima, India

**Abstract:** The paper is an attempt to analyse the silent struggle of forgotten voices, political abandonment and the instability of truth in the face of reality. The novella *No one writes to the colonel* presents a deplorable condition of an old couple living in the poverty waits for the pension which was promised fifteen years ago. The Colonel checks in every Friday with the postmaster for any news regarding the pension letter. The paper attempts to examine the novella through postmodern lens drawing on the theories of Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard to analyse how silence becomes the symbol of disillusionment, fracturing the reality that shapes the Colonel's experience. The non-existent letter from the silent government reflects the collapse of the centralized grand narrative, representing the fragility of the truth. The couple's reality becomes a repository of hyperreality, reconstructing reality out of illusion and hope. The paper is an attempt to explore the power of silence over the spoken discourse in the reality where the marginalized figures are erased from historical and political narratives.

**Keywords:** Disillusionment, Hyperreality, Instability, Postmodernism, Silence

## INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a Columbian Novelist, one of the forerunners of the Latin American Boom, renowned for engaging in themes of love, satire, magical realism etc. The novella, *No One Writes to the Colonel* set in Marquez's fictional town "Macondo", featured in several of his novels like *One Hundred*

*Years of Solitude*, *Leaf Storm* etc. Considered as the forerunner of Latin American novelists, Marquez has made a significant impact in literature, especially in the world of Latin America. The novella, *No One Writes to the Colonel* focuses on an unnamed elderly couple- the Colonel and his asthmatic wife living in poverty, awaiting the pension letter that never arrives. Marquez explores the tension created by the uncomfortable silence around the Colonel and his wife as they navigate through the world of uncertainty. These characters reconstruct their own reality to combat the uncomfortable silence that surrounds them. The Colonel clings to hope, while his wife becomes increasingly skeptical. The silence between them is both a fragile truth and an unbearable burden, reflecting the postmodern urban state of chaos and loss of grand narratives, mirroring the chaotic and fragmented socio-political reality of Latin America.

### Objective

The paper aims to analyse the silent struggle of the marginalized elderly individuals in the wake of reality. The power of silence often more expressive than spoken discourse illustrates the lamentable condition of those who are forgotten and discarded by the political institutions after having sacrificed their youths. The bitter truth of being overlooked reflects the collapse of the centralized narrative, affecting all the sections of the society, leaving the marginalized particularly helpless. The novel presents the painful reality of the Colonel and his aged wife as the disillusionment of the powerless, as they wait for the letter that never materializes. In the silence of waiting, tension builds, enabling the couple to construct varied realities to cope with the harsh truth. Silence becomes a symbol as both- a fragile truth and an oppressive weight, forcing the Colonel and his wife to confront, evade, and redefine the painful reality behind the absence of the letter.

### Textual analysis

The novella *No One Writes to the Colonel* presents the story of a Colonel and his wife, waiting for the pension letter for fifteen years. Every Friday, he visits post office only to be met with disappointment. His wife burdened with ill health and increasing cynicism, urges him to face the reality. Both their health are deteriorating, their predicament compounded by raising the rooster left by their late son. The rooster is a symbol of hope and desperation- its potential success in the cockfight offers a ray of financial relief for them. The Colonel and his wife struggle in silence as they try to navigate their life through the poverty. While the colonel interprets silence as a space for hope, his wife rather sees the silence from the government as a confirmation of abandonment by the political institution. This disconnection in their perspectives

heightens their emotional and existential crisis, forcing them to confront not just their material struggle but also the erasure of their existence by a system that no longer acknowledges them.

Marquez's firsthand experience in the socio-political unrest of Columbia particularly the La Violencia from 1948-1964 shapes and influence his perspective on the political institution and the struggle of ordinary citizen. Marquez channels this socio political unrest into the Colonel and his wife's silent struggle, as they are neglected by the system. The silence from the government on the long- promised pension portrays its abandonment towards their own common people. The Colonel and his wife's experience reflect and represents the marginalized perspective, the voice of the forgotten. The poverty, unfulfilled promises and the corruption of the system underscores the impact of the La Violencia which affected all the sections of the people, particularly leaving the marginalized more helpless. The novel represents not just a reflection of the socio-political impact, but also the critiques on the political failure and instability, ultimately having adverse effect on the people. Palayo observes, "Violence was everywhere in Colombia during the 1950s, but people could not speak out against the government. The dictatorship of President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla was so severe that much that Colombians did was indeed clandestine. In the novel, Agustin, the old colonel's son, is killed in 1956 for distributing clandestine literature." (Pelayo 20)

Jean Francois Lyotard's theory of postmodernism argues the loss of grand narratives, he implores, "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation." (Lyotard 37) The failure of the state in fulfilling its promise leads to distrust in their truth. Nevertheless, the Colonel's faith in the government's commitment represents a futile hope in a system which has already abandoned him. The political system falls short in their actions to their words, leaving the people helpless and powerless. The long awaited letter never arrives, much like the premise of Samuel Beckett's absurd play, *Waiting for Godot* where the character waits for a person that never arrives.

Lyotard's argument on the decline of grand narratives lead to the rise of capitalism "the decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War," ( Lyotard 37) and the emergence of advanced liberal capitalism, which "has eliminated the communist alternative and valorized the individual enjoyment of goods and services" (Lyotard 38). This paradigm shift from the loss of grand narratives to subjective perspective is also embodied in the character Sabas. He was

also an ally to the Colonel during the times of war, spared from persecution and now gains from political corruption. He strives towards his own self-interest in the poverty stricken world. Sabas exemplify how capitalism has rendered alternative socio-political structures vulnerable that ultimately force people to strive for their own economic survival rather than depend on the state's justice or truth. Marquez brings forth the loss of faith by a generation that once fought for similar ideologies with the state but ultimately succumbs to the fragmented capitalist reality in a chaotic postmodern world. The wife's comparison of their situation to Sabas' brings forward the disparity of their living standard, 'There's my friend Sabas with a two-story house that isn't big enough to keep all his money in, a man who came to this town seling medicines with a snake cured around his neck.' (Marquez 46). The once ordinary salesman had amassed wealth and lives in luxury for embracing the capitalistic order, while the colonel remains trapped in the crumbling system that failed to uphold their promises. The feeble condition of the marginalized older aged people in the novella puts forth the decadence of the political and sociological landscape in the wake of urbanization and globalization. Although the novella highlights the perspective of the Colonel and his experience, he serves as a voice of the forgotten, a reminder of all the marginalized old aged people that longs to survive in the real harsh world.

Jean Baudrillard also argues the distinction between reality and representation which collapses, leaving only the simulacra- the simulation without the original- "It's a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere." ( Baudrillard 2). The Colonel's hope for the letter is only a simulacra, an illusion which never materializes in reality. His reality and hope are based on the abstract and not a concrete reality. He clings to this illusion for fifteen years, visiting the post office every Friday with new hope, despite the government's silence. He is caught in a narrative which no longer upholds its commitment. Similarly, Sabas' success and thriving in the corrupt system also reflect another layer of hyperreality, as he has abandoned his revolutionary ideals and built is empire on betrayal and self-interest. Both the Colonel and his wife are living in a hyperreality, masking their painful reality with a façade to endure their suffering. Despite their struggle to make ends meet, scraping and selling almost everything to buy food and basic necessities, they maintain an illusory charade of self-sufficiency, so that their neighbors would be unaware of their hardship. "Several times I've had to put stones on to boil so the neighbours wouldn't know that we often go for many days without putting on the pot." (Marquez 45).



The absence of the letter creates tension in their conversation every Friday forcing them to confront their disappointment. Their communication- or lack thereof- makes them more conscious about their dire situation. It is evident from their conversations-

“ ‘Look what’s left of our circus clown’s umbrella,’ said the colonel...

‘Everything’s that way’ She whispered. ‘We’re rotting alive.’ ” (Marquez 4).

Their varied approach towards their future is stark, the wife’s illness draining her patience and hope. Her frustration is apparent when she says,

“And you’re dying of hunger... You should realize that you can’t eat dignity.” (Marquez 46)

The wife urges the Colonel to face the reality of their painful condition, yet the Colonel refuses to acknowledge the reality. Admitting that they would never receive the letter would mean that they were abandoned, and he had wasted fifteen years of waiting. Accepting the reality meant facing the truth, and for the Colonel, it would not only confirm his suffering but would also strip him off his dignity and pride, admission that his service to the nation was all in vain. The tension in their conversation illustrates their different worldviews, and the silence denotes the unspoken truth which is too oppressive to confront.

‘ ‘You can’t eat hope,’ the woman said.

‘You can’t eat it, but it sustains you.’ the colonel replied.’ (Marquez 43).

The silence remains an agonizing admonition for the colonel and his wife, for which it becomes unbearable and almost suffocating towards the end of the novella. It is not mute and subtle, but poses a heavy weight on both of them; their silence is no longer bearable, that they reach a breaking point. They can no longer conceal their suffering, poverty and the neglect. The prolonged effects of hunger and deprivation lead the colonel into having hallucinations and delirium while his wife has severe asthma attacks frequently that she could no longer press his clothes. Her physical appearance was so fragile that she looked like she had the “power of walking through the wall.” (Marquez 15). Despite the colonel’s insistence on having faith in government’s pension, the novella contains, subtle nudge to the colonel to confront the truth- the lines,

“The only thing that comes for sure is death, colonel.” (Marquez 41)

“The woman lost her patience. ‘And meanwhile, what do we eat?’ ” (Marquez 69).

The wife's obscure thoughts for their future highlight her desperation to find assurance amid isolation and abandonment. On the other hand, the colonel's insistence on keeping the rooster reflects his personal as well as the entire town's hope for a better future, despite the uncertainty of the cockfight. Although his wife's urges the colonel to sell off the rooster so that they may get immediate relief, the colonel prefers to hold on to the faith in the rooster as well as the government's pension relief, when neither may come into fruition. His refusal to approach these obscure notions illustrates his silent resistance in accepting defeat even if his circumstance worsens. The deafening silence becomes a tool of resistance for the Colonel and the entire town, just as how the government gives the veterans the silent treatment.

The novella portrays the grim reality of the Colonel's unyielding hope in a system that has already abandoned him. Through the Colonel and his wife's silent struggle, Marquez highlights the plight of marginalized individuals who, despite being neglected and impoverished, continue to place their faith in a government that has already forgotten them. Marquez's *No One Writes to the Colonel* serves as a poignant reminder of the impact on those who can no longer fend for themselves in a failed political system.

While the paper presents a study on the disillusionment caused by the collapse of grand narratives, it also sheds light on the stark realities of postmodern Latin America, in which the survival of the people are dictated by systemic injustice and economic disparity. The novella not only highlights political corruption, the power dynamic of the state and the people, but it also present the emotional and psychological effect of a prolonged uncertainty. The silence in the novella becomes more than just an absence of words—it embodies shattered dreams, ideals and also the slow disintegration of hope. Thus, *No One Writes to the Colonel* is a powerful reminder of resilience in the face of abandonment, where humans crave to find hope even in distress. Marquez presents the struggle of those who have been erased by history, reminding once again that silence is also sometimes the loudest words for justice.

#### Works Cited

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor university of Michigan Press. 1994.

1984.

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. *No One Writes to the Colonel*. Penguin Books, 1996.

Martin, Gerald. *Journeys through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century*.

Verso.1989.

Peyalo, Reuben. *Gabriel Garcia Marquez: A Critical Companion*. Greenwood Press. 1954.

