

Excess and Exaggeration: A Critical Reading of Gabriel García Márquez's short story *Big Mama's Funeral*

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Abstract: Latin American nations have been subject to enormous political upheavals since colonial times—a history burdened with an extreme abuse of power leading to gross socio-economic inequities till present times. Even after centuries of independence from colonial control; the prejudices, injustices and excesses still persist in the nations. In Colombia as well as in most other Latin American nations, the powerful elites—usually the landed aristocracy (also called *latifudistas*) have traditionally retained and monopolized political power. Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez has most often used his writings as an effective tool in exposing the malaise of an anachronistic power structure. This paper aims to critically analyse Márquez's short story 'Big Mama's Funeral' in the context of the malignant socio-political scenario.

Keywords: Latin America, Gabriel García Márquez, latifundia, colonial legacy, political excess

Across the Americas, the Spanish and Portuguese built colonial societies on a clear and harsh hierarchy: a social structure where a small, white elite controlled economic and political power through their control of land and a non-European labour force. The pronounced inequities built into these structures of exploitation are the most enduring and burdensome legacy of Latin America (Eakin 105).

Exploitation of land as well as that of the vast natural and mineral resources of Latin America was one of the dominant aspects of the colonial powers which continued till the twentieth century. Agriculture and an agrarian based economy built on trade and exports of food products and raw materials have been one of the most pronounced legacies of colonial Latin America. Since the beginning of colonial domination, the Spanish conquistadors tactfully as well as forcefully conquered the lands which also led to the exploitation of a huge but compliant labour force comprising mostly of Native Americans and later of the Africans. Out of this emerged the huge landed estates (*latifundio*) whose profits and produce depended on the exploitation of the native labour force. A coercive labour system emerged out of the land-owning or rather land grabbing policies. Land ownership, therefore, has always been a crucial factor in determining one's position in a Latin American society and “from colonial times onwards, possessions of large tracts of land has been the most public and effective affirmation of political power” (23) and in fact “landownership *was* power” (Calvert 23). In Marshall.C.Eakin's words:

Quite clearly, the large estates and their owners dominated the economy, monopolized political power, and stood at the top of the social pyramid. They were a very small minority of landholders (with great power), and then vast majority of landholdings were small and medium plots. In effect, the large estates were at the center of a complex network of properties, with many small landholders dependent upon the large estates for their very survival. Control of these large estates has historically been the key to control of the economy and the political system. In Latin America, those who controlled the fruits of the large estates ruled all the land. Throughout the colonial era, and well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in some countries, the most powerful local, regional, and national political positions were filled by men whose wealth came from the land. The second most powerful group was merchants engaged in overseas commerce, a trade driven by exports from the land. In the least economically developed regions of Latin America, Central America being the prime example, this domination of the landed elite families lasted into the late twentieth century. Land was power-economic, social, and political. (96)

Massive exploitation as well as abuse of power continued even after colonial domination ended. In Colombia, as well as in other Latin American nations, political power was retained mostly by the local elites while effectively limiting the participation as well as involvement of the masses in power-sharing processes of the nation; and in fact, the

huge social, economic and cultural divide between a relatively small elite and the masses of impoverished peoples that emerged out of the Iberian conquest in the sixteenth century has not only persisted for centuries, but it has also intensified. Contrary to what many would expect, economic development and the emergence of democracy in Latin America have not done much to close this enormous social and economic divide. It has been one of the most powerful constants in Latin American history across the constantly changing political and economic regimes. (Eakin 14)

And according to Stephen Hart, García Márquez's 'Big Mama's Funeral' is an attempt to "allegorise the grotesque nature of post-colonial political reality in Latin America" (137). Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez is one of the most acclaimed writers of the region, in whose writings we can find a sublime understanding of the Latin American political scenario, its history as well as a deep sense of protest against the corruption, exploitation and gross violation of human rights which has been a menace in most Latin American nations. This short story revolves round the funeral of Big Mama— the matriarch of Macondo. Márquez exploits the plot of the funeral to comment on the exploitative socio-economic system maintained and preserved through centuries by Big Mama and her ancestors. Exaggerated details of her incredulous powers, rights and privileges as well as a commentary on the entire scenario of the funeral of the rotten corpse serves to satirise the rotten system that had prevailed through the ages. Her death marks not only the end of the story but also the end of exploitation and corruption and also invigorates the dying hopes of an exploited population. Big Mama is a powerful

matriarch of Macondo whose death and funeral is a 'national commotion' as the narrator calls it and the narrator's decision to give the details of the event before the official historians get to record it, immediately raises the question of the intention of the writer, as to "who is speaking. On behalf of what group? And in the interests of which, and whose, truth?" (Fiddian 214) Filled with details which borders on exaggeration and an intensely satirical tone, the narrator decides to "relate from the beginning the details of this national commotion, before the historians have a chance to get at it" (Márquez 153). Big Mama's imminent death necessitated her to sort out her "worldly affairs in order" (Márquez 154). The narrator's description of her convoluted family circle:

within which uncles married the daughters of their nieces, and the cousins married their aunts, and brothers their sisters-in-law, until an intricate mesh of consanguinity was formed, which turned procreation into a vicious circle... On the margins of the official family, and in exercise of the *jus primae noctis*, the males had fertilized ranches, byways, and settlements with an entire bastard line, which circulated among the servants without surnames, as godchildren, employees, favorites, and protégés of Big Mama. (154-5)

exposes the moral depravity of the family as well as parodies "several of the royal families of Europe fabled for their inbreeding and degeneracy, while the number of bastards wandering around Big Mama's estate evokes the stigmatized stories of family life told in numerous Spanish American novels ..." (Fiddian 214). Big Mama's unbelievably immense property and authority dates back to more than two centuries as she "had been Macondo's center of gravity, as had her brothers, her parents, and the parents of her parents in the past, in a dominance which covered two centuries" (Márquez 155); which is at once, reflective of the colonial heritage passed down till many generations. The elites' unjust appropriation of power as well as centuries of submissiveness of the masses makes even the most grotesque nature of degeneracy seem natural: "No one knew the origin, or the limits or the real value of her estate, but everyone was used to believing that Big Mama was the owner of the waters, running and still, of rain and drought, and of the district's roads, telegraph poles, leap years, and heat waves, and that she had furthermore a hereditary right over life and property" (155). Big Mama's 'hereditary right over life and property' is a mocking display of centuries of exploitation and control over the colonized peoples' lives and their lands. The boundless lands and privileges enjoyed by Big Mama is symbolic of the entire landed oligarchy that had dominated Latin America for centuries and who indulged in gross moral, economic, social and political injustices:

Reduced to its true proportions, the real estate was limited to three districts, awarded by Royal Decree at the founding of the Colony; with the passage of time, by dint of intricate marriages of conveniences, they had accumulated under the control of Big Mama. In that unworked territory, without definite borders, which comprised five townships and in which not one single grain

had ever been sown at the expense of the proprietors, three hundred and fifty-two families lived as tenant farmers. Every year, on the eve of her name day, Big Mama exercised the only act of control which prevented the lands from reverting to the state: the collection of rent. Seated on the back porch of her house, she personally received the payment for the right to live on her lands, as for more than a century her ancestors had received it from the ancestors of the tenants. (159-60)

The narrator's "relentless satire" (Fiddian 215) scandalously exposes Big Mama's "indiscriminate appetite for moral and political control" (Fiddian 215) as she further gives a list of her 'invisible estate' which comprises of:

The wealth of the subsoil, the territorial waters, the colors of the flag, national sovereignty, the traditional parties, the rights of man, civil rights, the nation's leadership, the right of appeal, Congressional hearings, letters of recommendation, historical records, free elections, beauty queens, transcendental speeches, huge demonstrations, distinguished young ladies, proper gentlemen, punctilious military men, His Illustrious Eminence, the Supreme Court, goods whose importation was forbidden, liberal ladies, the meat problem, the purity of the language, setting a good example, the free but responsible press, the Athens of South America, public opinion, the lessons of democracy, Christian morality, the shortage of foreign exchange, the right of asylum, the Communist menace, the ship of state, the high cost of living, republican traditions, the underprivileged classes, statements of political support. (Márquez 161)

This exaggerated detail of her 'invisible estate' is a scathing attack on the excesses of a corrupt oligarchy whose greed for power has affected millions of common people throughout centuries. In a statement which is both solemn and banal, the narrator finally describes the death of Big Mama: "Drowning in the pandemonium of abstract formulas which for two centuries had constituted the moral justification of the family's power, Big Mama emitted a loud belch and expired" (Márquez 161). The 'abstract formulas' which served as the 'moral justification of the family's power' ironically points "that the appropriation, by Big Mama and her cronies, of the ideals and catchwords of democracy along with the values and slogans of a stagnant and reactionary conservatism, gave moral legitimacy to a centuries-long monopoly on power" (Fiddian 215). The story is indeed a "satire about the grotesque nature of the rights and privileges claimed by the conquerors of Latin America— and indeed by their successors in post-Independence Latin America" (Hart 138). But the story also carries an implied criticism of the common people because "whilst it cannot be denied that the people have been victims of what is de facto a feudal abuse of power, they are, he suggests, also guilty of complicity in their own repression and mystification" (Fiddian 216). For example, in one of the earlier passages, the narrator mentions that "everyone was used to believing that Big Mama was the owner of the waters..." (Márquez 155). Centuries of continuing dominance, exploitation and a prevailing and persisting discourse of the

natural and hereditary rights of the elites have led to the continuity of the status quo; and it is because of the lack of a dissenting voice that the oligarchy can “simply arrogate to themselves privileges, and rights, and things as if they were godlike” (Hart 137-8). The end of the story which coincides with the final entombment of the putrefying corpse of Big Mama also heralds as what the narrator calls “the birth of a new era” (Márquez 169). Big Mama's death, her putrefying corpse and finally the funeral symbolizes the collapse of an old, anachronistic political and social order which was long due. The sense of exaltation and freedom is evident as now “the common people could set up their tents where they damn well pleased in the limitless domains of Big Mama, because the only one who could oppose them and had sufficient power to do so had begun to rot beneath a lead plinth” (Márquez 169). And the narrator ends stating that the only thing remaining “was for someone to lean a stool against the doorway to tell this story, lesson and example for further generations...” (168-9). The expectations of hope and freedom due to the collapse of the anachronistic order of which Big Mama is a distorted embodiment can also be historically alluded to the Cuban Revolution. The anti-colonialist ideology of the Cuban Revolution ushered in a ray of hope for entire Latin America. After the funeral of Big Mama, some of those present during the whole showdown “were sufficiently aware as to understand that they were witnessing the birth of a new era” (Márquez 169); and according to Robin Fiddian :

Political history and allegorical narrative are brought into alignment crucially, at this point. The death of feudal, colonial and neo-colonial practices in the fictional realm of Macondo coincides with the birth of a new moral and political order on the Caribbean island that will promptly become the focus of the world's attention and various expectations. It is here that the date of composition and moment of enunciation of García Márquez's narrative acquire their keenest relevance. Written in 1959, 'Big Mama's Funeral' captures and translates the seismic shift affecting the political order of the hispanophone and non-hispanophone Caribbean, and that of the world beyond” (220).

'Big Mama's Funeral' indeed is a story which needs to be recorded and passed down (as what the narrator believes) as an 'example for future generations'.

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