

An analysis of the portrayal of women in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Strange pilgrims*

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Abstract

This article analyses the portrayal of women by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927–2014) in his collection of short stories, *Strange pilgrims* (1992). It consists of 12 stories and offers a variety of women in various roles. This helps to answer the question on whether Marquez is sympathetic towards women (housewives, prostitutes, clerks and fortune tellers to name a few). Does he dismiss them as victims? Are they villains? Are the women actively involved in influencing the course of their lives? How representative are they of the Latin American character?

Introduction

Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927–2014) was a prolific Colombian author with a journalistic background which enabled him to capture truth in a unique way. This article focuses on his collection of stories, *Strange pilgrims* (1992) because it offers a variety of women in diverse circumstances. In the prologue the author says:

The twelve stories in this book were written over the last eighteen years. Before they reached their current form, five of them had been journalistic notes and screenplays, and one was a television serial. Fifteen years ago I recounted another during a taped interview with a friend who transcribed and published the story, and now I've written it on the basis of his version. This has been a strange creative process that should be explained, if only so that children who want to be writers when they grow up will know how insatiable and abrasive the writing habit can be (Marquez 1992, p. vii).

The collection is interesting in so far as it portrays life in Latin America, in transit to and from Europe, and the experiences of Latinos in Europe. Marquez takes the reader along with the characters on these pilgrimages, seemingly ordinary, but true to magical realism, also truly marvellous. The *New York Times*, in its obituary for Marquez, called him “a conjurer of literary magic” and “a giant of 20th century literature” (Kandell 2014). Manyarara (2011, p. 228) notes that Marquez's work has attracted divergent critical acclaims, yet he has insisted

that he “captures ... a reality which is not on paper but which lives in [us] and determines each moment of [our] daily deaths, one which constantly replenishes an insatiable fount of creation, full of unhappiness and beauty, ... the nub of [our] solitude”.

Marquez’s representation of characters is, therefore, detailed, highlighting cause and effect, so that the reader fully appreciates the characters. The article focuses on Marquez’s portrayal of women in the context that some critics have applauded him for promoting feminism (Leyson 2001; Roses 2004); while others have castigated him for a negative representation of women as objects for male gratification (Terrones 2011). The above comments are in the context of female sexuality, and the article looks at the full representation of women so as to interpret whether they are positive or negative rather than one aspect of the characters. Analysis is, therefore, guided by a specific story line rather than any specific theoretical framework. This is in line with the author’s claim that he represents reality and that the stories were developed from journalistic notes.

The nature of short stories is that they are packed in meaning. Therefore, it is expedient that the article focuses on selected stories rather than the full anthology. *Sleeping Beauty and the airplane*, *I sell my dreams* and *The trail of your blood in snow* will be looked at in detail to analyse Marquez’s portrayal of women.

Women and beauty

Marquez describes his work as “full of unhappiness and beauty”. The characters in the stories have reasons to be unhappy, yet within the misery and struggle, they find a beautiful aspect to celebrate. It seems as if Marquez is saying that in this pilgrimage of life, the struggles are many but people must not forget to take the time to enjoy the simple/natural things in life: coffee, sleep, sex and love. In that sense, even though most of the stories end with a death, there is a sense in which it is not tragic because they would have lived their life in full. Maria dos Prazeres in the story of the same title becomes preoccupied with death to the extent that she forgets her beauty but is pleasantly surprised and reminded to live when a young man shows her that she is still attractive despite being old. She then reinterprets her dream not to mean her death, but a new lease of life after release from a sedentary routine.

The master of words, Marquez describes the physical beauty of women with amazing detail that enables the reader to picture them. What is amazing is that he does not fall into stereotypical representations of beauty by ethnicity or race. He captures the humanity of the specific character. Maria dos Prazeres is a “slender, spirited mullata, with wiry hair and pitiless yellow eyes” (Marquez 1992, p. 98). Nena Daconte in *The trail of your blood in snow* is “almost a child, with the eyes of a happy bird, and molasses skin still radiant with the bright Caribbean sun in the mournful January gloom” (ibid, p. 162). Maria de la Luz Cervantes in *I only came to use the phone* is “twenty-seven years old, a thoughtful, pretty Mexican who had enjoyed a certain fame as a music hall performer a few years earlier” (ibid, p. 71). Frau Frieda in *I sell my dreams* is described as “about thirty, and did not carry her years well, for she had never been pretty and had begun to age before her time. But she was a charming human being. And one of the most awe-inspiring” (ibid, p. 64). Her beauty is not physical but in personality. Lazara Davies in *Bon voyage, Mr. President* is “A slender mullatta from

San Juan, Puerto Rico, she was small and solid, the color of cooked caramel, and had eyes of a vixen, which matched her temperament well" (ibid, p. 15). The women, in their various shades of beauty represent the beauty of Latin America. As Chirere (2012) notes, they are captured doing their best to survive on European soil. There is one exception to this portrayal and that is found in *Sleeping Beauty and the airplane*.

Sleeping Beauty and the airplane

Sleeping Beauty and the airplane is a story of a beautiful woman who travels from Paris to New York told by a male voyeur. The physical presence of this woman haunts the narrator who searches for her during a storm that grounds all flights. He is lucky to sit next to her on the flight but she sleeps throughout the flight. He is content to watch her sleep but disappointed when she leaves without conversing with him. The narrator's attention is drawn to her the first time she walks into the airport. She is described as follows:

She was beautiful and lithe, with soft skin the color of bread and eyes like green almonds, and she had straight black hair that reached to her shoulders, and an aura of antiquity that could just as well have been Indonesian as Andean. She was dressed in subtle taste: a lynx jacket, a raw silk blouse with very delicate flowers, natural linen trousers, and shoes with a narrow stripe the color of bougainvillea. 'This is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen,' I thought when I saw her pass by with the stealthy stride of a lioness while I waited in the check in line at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris for the plane to New York. She was a supernatural apparition who existed only for the moment and disappeared into the crowd in the terminal (Marquez 1992, p. 54).

This is the opening of the story which heightens the suspense. The reader wonders if she is real, a ghost or an angel. Considering Marquez's use of magical realism these are plausible possibilities. Unlike the other struggling characters, the sleeping beauty is nameless and seems to be in total control of her life as indicated by the imagery used. The "stealthy stride of a lioness" gives idea of one in control and proud of it. Her skin is without blemish and also soft therefore she is not exposed to harsh conditions; harsh weather or menial labour. She also flies in business class rather than skimping for a passage in a boat or flying economy class. She is a woman of the world as she speaks French, English and Spanish. She arranges her belongings methodically with precision. On the plane she sleeps throughout the flight without changing position reminding one of the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty who is awakened by a kiss of true love. Since the narrator has already declared his love at first sight, this also raises the suspense.

Coetze (2006, p.8) noting the influence of other authors on Marquez, has the following to say on the story:

In the case of *Memories*, the debt to Yasunari Kawabata, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968, is conspicuous. In 1982 Garcia Márquez wrote a story, 'Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane', in which Kawabata is specifically alluded to. Seated in the first-class cabin of an airplane crossing the Atlantic beside a young woman of extraordinary beauty who sleeps throughout the flight, Garcia Marquez's narrator is reminded of a novel by Kawabata about aging men who pay money to spend nights with drugged, sleeping girls. As a work of fiction the 'Sleeping Beauty' story is undeveloped, no more than a sketch. Perhaps for this reason,

Garcia Marquez feels free to reuse its basic situation – the no longer young admirer side by side with the sleeping girl – in *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*.

The above quotation affirms Marquez's claim in the prologue that the stories were written and rewritten several times before the present form. They were initially intended to be novels but he settled for short stories. Marquez is well known for his unpredictable plots and hence this story fits the mould. Though the narrator claims to live the experience of the senile men in Kawabata's novel whose pleasure is in watching the women sleeping, there is evidence of torture and loneliness. The Sleeping Beauty is oblivious of her power or the narrator's presence yet all his senses are awakened to her. He drinks to her and converses with her. He lowers his seat to same level so that they are "closer than if we had been in a marriage bed" (Marquez 1992, p. 59). He longs to see her awake but lacks the courage to wake her.

The closing paragraph casts her again in mythical terms:

She awoke by herself at the moment the landing lights went on, and she was as beautiful and refreshed as if she had slept in a rose garden. That was when I realized that like old married couples, people who sit next to each other on airplanes do not say good morning to each other when they wake up. Nor did she. She took off her mask, opened radiant eyes, straightened the back of the seat, moved the blanket aside, shook the hair that fell into place of its own weight, put the toiletry case back on her knees, and applied rapid, unnecessary makeup, which took just enough time so that she did not look at me until the plane door opened. Then she put on her lynx jacket, almost stepped over me with a conventional excuse in pure Latin American Spanish, left without even saying good-bye or at least thanking me for all I had done to make our night together a happy one, and disappeared into the sun of today in the Amazon jungle of New York (ibid, p. 61).

This image of beauty is juxtaposed with the narrator's face "contemptible and ugly, in the mirror, and "amazed that the devastation of love could be so terrible" (ibid, p. 60). While Sleeping Beauty's actions are methodical, the narrator's are clumsy again calling to mind a parallel with the fairy tale *Beauty and the beast*.

The disappointment that she did not thank him is expressed in a language that seems to suggest they have been on a date for the evening. In the narrator's mind, it has been a one night marriage albeit the girl is unaware of his feelings towards her. His obsession with her leads him to observe every detail of her physical appearance and action in reverence, like a worshiper of a goddess. Reference to the Amazon jungle reminds the reader of the Queen of the Amazons, another image of a woman fully in control of her world, un-subdued. Since such a woman does not exist in real life, she remains unnamed and a dream for romantic fulfilment.

The trail of your blood in the snow

The theme of romance connects the story above to the last story in the anthology *Strange pilgrims*. Nena Daconte is an accomplished young woman, fluent in "four languages without an accent" having spent most of her life in Europe. On her return to Colombia her privacy is intruded by Billy Sanchez in the women's dressing rooms at Marbella beach. She is saved

from being raped by her quick thinking but the stage is set for a twist in events as they fall in love and get married. The story is centred on their trip to France for their honeymoon. Nena is pricked by a rose and bleeds all the way from Madrid to Paris while Billy is obsessed with driving his new automobile, the latest on the market. Nena dies six hours after admission to a Parisian hospital but Billy only finds out after a week of waiting to visit in a shabby hotel near the hospital.

The imagery of *Beauty and the beast* is continued in this story. The focus, however, is not on physical beauty but character. Nena and Billy belong to the same social class and have physical beauty as highlighted in the following quotation:

Although the two diplomatic passports were in perfect order, the guard raised the lantern to make certain the photographs resembled their faces. Nena Daconte was almost a child, with the eyes of a happy bird, and molasses skin still radiant with the bright Caribbean sun in the mournful January gloom, and she was wrapped up to her chin in a mink coat that could not have been bought with a year's wages of the entire frontier garrison. Her husband, Bill Sanchez de Avila, who drove the car, was a year younger and almost as beautiful, and he wore a plaid jacket and a baseball hat. Unlike his wife, he was tall and athletic and had the iron jaw of a timid thug. But what best revealed the status of them both was the silver automobile whose interior exhaled a breath of living animal; nothing like it had ever been seen along that impoverished border. The rear seat overflowed with suitcases that were too new and many gift boxes that were still unopened. It also held the tenor saxophone that had been the overriding passion of Nena Daconte's life before she succumbed to the disquieting love of her tender beach hoodlum (ibid, pp. 162–163).

The words “disquieting love” hint at the negative ending of the story just like Shakespeare's “star crossed lovers” in *Romeo and Juliet*. Nena's innocence is highlighted in the imagery of a child and a happy bird. The juxtaposition of the Caribbean sun and the mournful January gloom highlights the irony of their situation. Nena's innocence contrasts with the timid thug and hoodlum descriptors for Billy. He is consumed by his own passions to the extent that nothing else matters:

NenaDaconte, on the other hand, was exhausted, in particular by the last stretch of highway from Madrid, which was the edge of a cliff fit for mountain goats and lashed by hailstorms. And so after Bayonne she wrapped a handkerchief around her ring finger, squeezing it tightly to stop the blood that was still flowing, and fell into a deep sleep. Billy Sanchez did not notice until close to midnight, when the snow had ended and the wind in the pines stopped all at once and the sky over the pastureland filled with glacial stars. He had passed the sleeping lights of Bordeaux but stopped only to fill the tank at a station along the highway, for he still had the energy to drive to Paris without a break. He was so delighted with his big, 25 000[pounds] toy that he did not even ask himself if the radiant creature asleep at his side – the bandage on her ring finger soaked in blood and her adolescent dream pierced for the first time by lightning flashes of uncertainty – felt the same way too (ibid, pp. 164–165).

Billy is self-centred. They do not seek medical attention in Madrid because he is so enthralled with the new wedding present that he keeps everyone, including the ambassador, in the snow while he checks out every detail of the Bentley convertible. While he enjoys living on edge as reflected in the highway from Madrid, it tires his wife. Billy focuses on driving all the way to Paris without thinking of either his wife's bleeding finger or the fact that she is pregnant and needs to rest. In this instance no one watches sleeping beauty with adoration and the author

hints at a negative ending of the story as the adolescent dream is pierced. The bleeding of the ring finger might also be an omen pointing out that the wedding was a big mistake.

Contrary to Billy, Nena worries over Billy's driving long distances on his own but does not offer to help because she knows being driven by woman hurts his pride as a man. In hospital, she sends messages to him because she assumes he is staying in the hotel they booked. Nena does not realise the extent of her husband's lack of refinement. Instead of approaching the embassy for assistance, Billy tries to sneak into the hospital in hoodlum fashion. Consequently, he fails to get the message of Nena's death in time. However, in the time he waits for the visiting day, "he could not understand how he ever had lived without the help and protection of Nena Daconte" (ibid, p. 179). Nena has a positive influence on Billy, who comes from a dysfunctional family that thrives more on emotional bribes than love. He blackmails his mother with knowledge of her adulterous affairs and his father buys him expensive gifts from a sense of guilt. It is no wonder then that he learns to be selfish. In the initial meeting with Nena, he does not rape her so as to save his reputation because she claims:

'I've seen them bigger and harder,' she said, controlling her terror. 'So think again about what you're doing, because with me you'll have to perform better than a black man.' In reality not only was Nena Daconte a virgin, but until that moment she had never seen a naked man, yet her challenge was effective. All that Billy Sanchez could think of was to smash the fist rolled in chain against the wall and break his hand. She drove him to the hospital in her car and helped him endure his convalescence, and in the end they learned together how to make love the correct way (ibid, pp. 166–167).

In the above story, the author uses the Amazon myth inverted again. Instead of the Amazon queen being defeated and tamed, she defeats her Theseus and tames him. Billy learns to love and be civil for a while. Unfortunately, the wedding lasts three days, and the rest of the week is spent pining for his hospitalised wife. On learning of her death and burial:

Billy Sanchez left without saying good-bye, without anything to say thank you for, thinking that the only thing he needed with great urgency was to find somebody and beat his brains out with a chain in revenge for his own misfortune. When he walked out of the hospital, he did not even realize that snow with no trace of blood was falling from the sky, in tender, bright flakes that looked like the downy feathers of doves, or that there was a festive air on the streets of Paris, because it was the first big snowfall in ten years (ibid, pp. 187–188).

The final paragraph quoted above highlights the tragedy of the story. They have come full circle but it is as if Nena has never lived, and Billy goes back to being a hoodlum relying on violence to express his personal anger and frustration. He does not learn to reach out to others. The words used to describe the snow are similar to the ones used to describe Nena, the brightness and the bird imagery. This is to signify a new beginning, the festive air, snow without a trace of blood, but Billy is incapable of growth and fails to notice because he is too selfish. Like the indignation of the narrator in *Sleeping Beauty and the airplane*, the reader is left indignant that Billy is not grateful for the effort Nena made to make his life bearable by refusing to live positively in memory of her.

I sell my dreams

While in *The trail of your blood in the snow*, Nena Daconte follows her adolescent dreams to her detriment, Frau Frieda's dreams make her fortune. Most of the characters in the anthology have strong faith in their dreams though at times they interpret them wrongly as in the case of Maria dos Prazeres and the President who are convinced they will die. This is the story of a woman who has the gift of interpreting dreams from Colombo. She moves to Austria to study music and voice but ends up selling dreams. The narrator says:

She never told her real name, and we always knew her by the Germanic tongue twister that we Latin American students in Vienna invented for her: Frau Frieda. I had just been introduced to her when I committed the happy impertinence of asking how she had come to be in a world so distant and different from the windy cliffs of Quindio, and she answered with a devastating:

'I sell my dreams.'

In reality, that was her only trade. She had been the third of eleven children born to a prosperous shopkeeper in old Caldas, and as soon as she learned to speak she instituted the fine custom in her family of telling dreams before breakfast, the time when their oracular qualities are preserved in their purest form (ibid, p. 64).

From an early age, Frau Frieda has power derived from interpreting dreams that influence people's lives. At seven, she predicts her brother's death from choking on sweets. In Vienna, she gets a job with a family that is "religious and therefore inclined to archaic superstitions, and they were delighted to take in Frau Frieda, whose only obligation was to decipher the family's daily fate through her dreams"(ibid, p. 65). This becomes the beginning of her accumulation of wealth because she inherits an estate "on condition that she continue dreaming for the family until her dreams come to an end" (ibid, p. 66). She acquires enough property that she is able to sell and retire to Portugal. It is then she travels on the same ship as Pablo Neruda and his wife from Naples. He dismisses her prophetic dreams claiming the superiority of poetry. However, he dreams of her during his sacred siesta. When she meets the narrator she tells him she dreamt of Neruda dreaming of her.

In Portugal, she seeks employment with the ambassador who takes her to Havana. She then has an accident on her way to the market and the narrator identifies her by the gold serpent ring with emerald eyes that she used to wear. The rest of her body is shattered beyond recognition. The story ends with the ambassador confirming her trade:

'In concrete terms,' I asked at last, 'What did she do?'

'Nothing,' he said, with a certain disenchantment. 'She dreamed.'

This story more than all the others in the collection confirms Marquez's belief in dreams. In an interview in Mexico, he admits that he is interested in dreams and their interpretations simply because they are part of life. They are also very much a part of the Latin American psyche that he seeks to portray in his works. Frau Frieda provides a service that is needed and therefore makes her fortune. She does not force people to believe in her. She reminds the reader of the Christian prophetic movement that is becoming popular worldwide.

Conclusion

Marquez's portrayal of women is, therefore, influenced by the desire to express truth in its various shades and circumstances. He is influenced by his background as a journalist. Commenting on the responsibilities of journalists and novelists, he says: "In journalism just one fact that is false prejudices the entire work. That's the only difference, and it lies in the commitment of the writer. A novelist can do anything he wants so long as he makes people believe it" (www.theparisreview.org).

In his portrayal of women, Marquez balances the realistic setting with the dream elements that makes them rise above their situations. The female characters are highly memorable and usually lend strength to those around them. They are usually more practical in pursuing their dreams as highlighted by Nena Daconte and Frau Frieda in the stories the article analysed in detail.

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