

## Commentary

# An Interpretation of Female Images in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

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**Abstract:** *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a masterpiece of Gabriel García Márquez, which tells the history of the Buendía family. There are all together eleven female images in this novel, all of whom play important roles in the rise and decline of this great family. This paper tries to interpret three representative female images in this novel who have decisive impacts on the destiny of this family, namely Úrsula Iguarán, Fernanda, and Amaranta Úrsula. Úrsula Iguarán is an image eliminating gender binary opposition, and Fernanda is an image that has no say in a patriarchal society, while Amaranta Úrsula represents the awakening of self-awareness of females who decide to fight against patriarchy. These three females represent different stages of social development, and show that only when females become confident and independent, awaken their self-awareness, and dare to fight against patriarchal oppression, can their subjectivity be fully achieved. Their destiny also reflects García Márquez's confusion about women's position in a patriarchal society, that is, although he calls for gender equality, men still have the dominant power.

**Keywords:** *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Female Images, Patriarchy, Feminism

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Gabriel García Márquez and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Gabriel García Márquez was a Colombian novelist, short-story writer, journalist and screenwriter. Regarded as one of the most outstanding writers in the 20th century, Márquez started as a journalist, and wrote many acclaimed non-fiction works and short stories, but he is best known for his novels. His works have achieved widespread commercial success and reputed for popularizing a literary style labeled as magic realism. Juan Manuel Santos, President of Colombia, honored him "the greatest Colombian who ever lived" on his death in April 2014. Márquez was brought up by his grandparents and was quite interested in his grandmother's stories, most of which were about some supernatural things. Both his grandmother and these stories inspired him a lot in his literary creation. His grandmother was smart, diligent, energetic, strong-willed, and would never give up even in

adversity. She had many children and was regarded as the supreme queen of the whole family. She is the prototype of Úrsula Iguarán in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

It is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that won Márquez the Nobel Prize for Literature. This piece of work is considered as a masterpiece which shows a panorama of Latin American history and society. It tells a story about seven generations in the Buendía family who lived in a small town called Macondo. A dominant theme in this novel is the inevitable and inescapable repetition of history in Macondo, as the protagonists are controlled by their pasts and the complexity of time. Besides, it can be easily found that the fate of Macondo is both doomed and predetermined from its very existence. Just as Erickson [1] said that "Fatalism is a metaphor for the particular part that ideology has played in maintaining historical dependence, by locking the interpretation of Latin American history into certain patterns that deny alternative possibilities. The narrative seemingly confirms fatalism in order to illustrate the feeling of entrapment that ideology can performatively create."

### 1.2. Patriarchy and Feminism in Latin America

Originally, patriarchy refers to the rule of fathers, the ancient patriarchs in the Abraham religious traditions [2]. However, it has evolved from being a term of primarily religious significance to one denoting an overarching social system that privileges one group, men, at the expense of another group, women. Taylor [3] mentioned that the rise of patriarchal domination was associated with the appearance of socially stratified hierarchical polities, institutionalized violence and the separated individual ego associated with a period of climatic stress. After considering these viewpoints, the author thinks that this kind of transition is closely linked with women's productivity. Friedrich Engels [4] thought that in the stone age women were qualified for the plantation industry because the land belonged to all the members of the clan and the agricultural development was restricted due to the imperfection of those tools. Besides, women did housework at home which also included productive labour, such as pottery, knitting and garden planting. Under this circumstance, women played an important role in economic life and shared the same social status with men. Úrsula Iguarán is such a woman. However, with the development of those agricultural tools, intensive work was needed to reclaim woodland and farmland, leading to the emergence of private ownership. Men became the owner of land, slaves and even women. During this period, women had a quite low social status. Fernanda in this novel is one of them. Fortunately, the development of science and technology brings about more power for women in modern society where women who have more capabilities will have more power [5]. In this period, women gradually receive more respect from men and have more confidence to achieve gender equality. Amaranta Úrsula is such a woman.

Male dominance was quite common in Latin America when Márquez wrote this novel. Latinos at that time considered "man" as chivalry, masculinity and gallantry, because they had more productivity than women whose main task was to look after family instead of going out to work. Since man is the breadwinner of a family, he has a higher status. Though not a feminist, Márquez still tried to evoke more care for women in his works. Úrsula Iguarán is an ideal woman in his mind, who is smart, diligent and has the androgyny. He also depicted the tragedy of Fernanda in the transitional period and Amaranta Úrsula in the destruction period, revealing his hesitation and doubts.

## 2. Previous Studies on One Hundred Years of Solitude

Above all the studies on *One Hundred Years of Solitude* abroad, the author finds that these studies can be categorized into four major groups. The first is the to study "magic realism" in this novel. For example, Mario Vargas Llosa [6] pointed out that Márquez's novels were variable due to many opposite things existing at the same time, e.g. traditional and modern things, local and universal things, and imaginary and real things. Researchers also analyze those rhetorical devices

which contribute to "magic realism" in his novel, e.g. symbol, exaggeration, metaphor, psychological realism and so on. The second is about "time" in this novel. It is commonly regarded that time is both circular and linear in this novel. For example, George R. McMurray [7] described the time structure in this novel as a "wheel" which is moving in a straight line while the point on the wheel is circulated. Gene H. Bell-Villada [8] also stated that the structure of this novel is not a single thread but a multilayered tapestry, which can be illustrated by those repeated names of the Buendía family. The third group focuses on the theme and plot of this novel. Scholars of this group tend to hold the view that the history of Macondo is the epitome of that of Latin America. Raymond L. Williams [9] thought that this novel depicted different levels of reality, including myth, society, history, psychology and so on, and thus can be interpreted from many perspectives, such as structuralism, archetypal criticism and so on. The fourth studies post-colonialism in Latin America, intending to analyze the relationship between colonial culture and imperial one. Besides, there are also some researches study "loneliness" of this novel.

As early as 1982 when Márquez won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Chinese scholars set to translate *One Hundred Years of Solitude* into Chinese and introduced it to Chinese readers. This action soon led to a boom in Chinese literary circle, even if it was officially granted its copyright publication in China in 2011. The author finds that apart from the above four focuses, Chinese scholars also make efforts in comparing it with some Chinese novels. Many Chinese scholars compare *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with *The Plains of White Deer*, a well-known Chinese novel written by Chen Zhongshi. For example, Liang Fuxing [10] compared "magic realism" of these two novels. Liu Jinhui [11] discussed cultural view of them from the perspective of images. Deng Zijing [12] talked about supernatural concepts in these two works. Works written by Mo Yan, a Nobel Prize winner in literature as well, are often chosen by some Chinese scholars to compare with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. For instance, they compared it with *Big Breasts & Wide Hips* [13], *Red Sorghum Clan* [14], *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* [15] to study magic realism. Some analyzed *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to study the "loneliness"[16] and the time structure [17] in these two works.

The author finds that many scholars pay attention to magic realism in this novel and its theme and writing skills, but quite a few study female images in it. Females in this novel play quite an important role in the destiny of the Buendía family. Thus, the author will analyze three representative female images in this novel by employing some theories such as Androgyny.

## 3. Interpretation of Three Representative Female Images

### 3.1. Úrsula Iguarán

Úrsula Iguarán is the most important role in this novel and

she is the mother of the Buendía family and even Macondo. She appeared in the beginning of this novel and died in the end, witnessing the rise and decline of the big family. As is mentioned above, this female image is created based on Márquez's grandmother and is an ideal female in Márquez's mind. Both femininity and masculinity are skillfully blended in Úrsula Iguarán, thus, she has the androgyny.

As a wife, Úrsula Iguarán is submissive and loyal. Her husband José Arcadio Buendía is quite addicted to things brought by gypsies. He once wanted to exchange a mule and two goats for two magnets from gypsies, Úrsula, though disagreed with his thought, did not stop her husband. When José Arcadio Buendía was fond of alchemy and asked her to give him some gold coins for experiment. She again made heavy concession although she wanted to use these money, saved by her father all his life, to do a small business to support the family. As a mother, she is brave, gentle and merciful. When her older son José Arcadio left Macondo following a group of gypsies, she decided to go to the marshland to look for him on her own for several months, though in vain. She expanded her house so that her daughters could have a better place to treat visitors. When her younger son Aureliano was demoralized after the battle, it is Úrsula that comforted and encouraged him. When he was in prison, no one was permitted to visit him. However, Úrsula made it at the risk of being killed. As a grandmother, she protected her grandson Arcadio with her body from those bullets outside. Even when she was blind just before the birth of José Arcadio, no one noticed it and she could still look after José Arcadio because she remembered the location of everything and could take advantage of her four other senses. Úrsula Iguarán is the pillar of the Buendía family and her death represents the decline of this big family.

Apart from being submissive, loyal, brave, gentle and merciful, Úrsula Iguarán still has masculinity. She is very diligent and support the whole family like a man. When her husband was addicted to his alchemy and made daydreams, she started her own business by selling sweets. Besides, she grew vegetables, raised livestock and nurtured her children and offsprings. It is her that arranges the whole family in a perfect order. In addition, she is valiant and decisive. When her husband's addiction to gypsy's things threatened the family, she gathered all people in Macondo to boycott his action. When her grandson Arcadio ruled Macondo like a dictator, persecuted townspeople and appreciated public funds for his private use, she called him murder and bastard, whipped him mercilessly, released those innocent prisoners and ruled the town by herself since then. When her son Aureliano decided to sentence José Raquel Moncada, the Conservative general, to death, she asked all mothers of those soldiers to stop it because José Raquel Moncada was a good mayor. However, this trial was in vain.

As can be seen above, femininity and masculinity are wonderfully blended in Úrsula Iguarán. This vividly reveals that women are rational, diligent, knowledgeable, and sober and can support the whole family and protect it from destruction in Márquez's mind. In contrast, men are the ones

who bring destruction because they are dissolute and fond of invention, alchemy, and war, all of which could bring about destruction. The reason why Úrsula Iguarán has androgyny is that she lives in the start-up period when she has the same economic productivity as men or even much more than them. For example, she has her own business, grows many vegetables and raised livestock, all of which provide her a higher social status.

### 3.2. *Fernanda*

Fernanda is the victim of patriarchy. In a society dominated by men, women are usually neglected. They are the inessential and the Other while men are the essential and the Absolute [5]. This is because in a patriarchal society, men dominate most areas, such as politics, economy, education, culture and marriage. Thus, women are subordinate to their counterparts and are deprived of many rights, such as going out for work, which means that they have no say and are unable to earn money or achieve a higher social status. A vicious circle is formed. Fernanda is one of those women. When she was unmarried, she was subordinate to her father, and when married, to her husband.

Fernanda grew up in a loveless family where she was cultivated as a queen. She was told to spread the linen and set up silver tableware when having meals. She learned Latin and zither, and how to talk to gentlemen and what to talk about. However, she had to knit baskets everyday because her family was not wealthy. She had a fixed and monotonous daily routine in which she recited the rosary around six o'clock every day and listened to the piano etudes at three p.m.. She always followed a fixed pattern and lived a formed life, in which her self-consciousness was gradually strangled. This sort of life explains her obedience to traditional rules after marriage and leads to her tragedy in her marriage.

Although Fernanda was cultivated as a queen and often told by her mother that she would be a queen one day, she still had to give in to the reality of the patriarchal society where she should act like a woman. This means that she has to be submissive, pure, mild and loyal to her husband. She is a "good" wife in such a patriarchal society for she was still submissive even though her husband had a concubine, Petra Cotes. The relationship between them three are quite weird. Fernanda pretended to know nothing about Petra Cotes and her only requirement was that Aureliano Segundo should not die in his concubine's bed. "Her husband lived at Petra Cotes's but he would visit Fernanda every day and sometimes he would stay to eat with the family, as if fate had reversed the situation and had made him the husband of his concubine and the lover of his wife." [18] In fact, she is lonely and unhappy, but she conceals the unhappiness and pretends to be happy. In addition, with the impact of her education, she wanted her children to receive similar "queen" education, leading to the tragedy of her daughter Meme.

As can be seen above, family is the center of Fernanda and women like her who are deeply influenced and persecuted by patriarchy. In such a society dominated by men, women have

no say and they have no choice but to be submissive to their father and their husband. Fernanda took all the rules learnt from her own family and wanted to carry out these rules in the Buendía family, leading to her incapability to integrate into this family. She is lonely for no one understands her, her husband does not love her and her daughter Meme hates her. As a woman, her life is also doomed to be a tragedy as she has no self-consciousness or ego and acts like a machine doing what a patriarchal society wants her to do.

### 3.3. *Amaranta Úrsula*

Amaranta Úrsula, just as the name shows, is as energetic and diligent as Úrsula Iguarán, the first generation of the Buendía family, and is as gentle as Amaranta, the second generation. Besides, she is as beautiful as Remedios the Beauty and is as modern as her sister Meme. She is the last female in this family and is the perfect for she almost has the merits of all females in this family. Of course, she is the last trial of García Márquez to realize his feminist thought. Amaranta Úrsula is a lucky girl as her father sent her to Brussels to receive modern education. This action frees her from the loneliness that spreads in this big family. She is the hope and the future of the Buendía family to save the family and Macondo. Driven by a strong yearning for home, Amaranta Úrsula came back from Brussels, determining to reconstruct Macondo. She is a paradox since she is very modern, a female cultivated with advanced western education, but she is still immersed in the history of Macondo. However, Macondo used to be quiet and beautiful but then came wars, strikes, prostitutes and champagne. Macondo was ravaged by military and police, filled with criminals, traders and immigrants. There was no rest but endless frenzy and uproar, profligacy and indulgence, sin and poverty. Thus, Amaranta Úrsula's effort is doomed to be a failure.

Like Úrsula Iguarán, Amaranta Úrsula also has both femininity and masculinity. When she came back from Brussels, she took her husband Gaston with a rope on his neck because she thought it was the symbol of loyalty. Besides, her husband loved her so much that he was ready to live in Macondo for several months to please her and he was always willing to make her happy. When Amaranta Úrsula confessed her love with Aureliano, her nephew, her husband did not blame her but wished them a happy life. In addition, she decided to repaint the house, refurbish the furniture, and even had her own fashion business since she had an instinct for it. Even when she lived with Aureliano, she was the breadwinner. It is clear that Amaranta Úrsula is independent, enterprising and determined. She has the ability to earn a living, and that is why she has an equal relationship with her husband. Just as Beauvoir said that a man would treat a woman as a wife and mother and show his respect to her after marriage only when this woman was independent and rebellious. In this case, the subordinate relationship between a husband and a wife in a patriarchal society disappears. [5]

As a woman, Amaranta Úrsula has femininity. She is elegant, energetic, and outgoing, and she brings vigor to this declining town. In spite of her masculinity, her femininity

takes up the upper hand in the end, which is vividly shown in her desperate pursuit of love. Her love to Aureliano, son of her sister Meme, is crazy and cursed. She "remained floating in an empty universe where the only everyday and eternal reality was love". When she was pregnant, "her long hair was neglected, the splotches began to appear on her face, her legs were swelling, and her former lovemaking weasel's body deformed changing Amaranta Úrsula from the youthful creature she had been when she arrived at the house with the cage of luckless canaries and her captive husband, but it did not change the vivacity of her spirit." [18] Although she wanted to call her son Rodrigo instead of Aureliano or José Arcadio, she eventually gave up because the baby's father wanted to name him Aureliano. All of them illustrate that Amaranta Úrsula, after making efforts to renovate Macondo, eventually gave in to love and returned home as is wished by a patriarchal society.

It is clear that García Márquez wants to create a modern female who shares an equal relationship with her counterpart and has the androgyny, but his trial is in vain. This reflects that García Márquez is quite confused about women's position in such a patriarchal society even though he calls for gender equality.

## 4. Conclusion

From the above three female images, it can be easily concluded that they represent women in three different stages of society, namely, primitive, agricultural and industrial society. Women's social status is closely linked to their productivity and their self-consciousness. Only when females become confident and independent, awaken their self-awareness, dare to fight against patriarchal oppression, and the whole society make joint efforts to realize gender equality, can female subjectivity be fully achieved.

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