Title: Role of Women in “One Hundred Years of Solitude”
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In ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude’, Gabriel Garcia Marquez presents a society that is equally dominated by men and women, although they are attributed different roles and operate in different spheres of influence. While the men seek pleasure, power or knowledge outside of the household, women exercise ultimate influence within the domestic realm where they exhibit superior morality, resourcefulness and pragmatism. The physical boundaries of their domains mean that women are often portrayed as ignorant of the outside world, but conversely they possess qualities such as innocence, virginity and old age which grant them supernatural clairvoyance and insight. Their primary function is reproduction and the continuation of the bloodline, but women also use their bodies as a weapon of manipulation and power. However they seem to attain the highest forms of power only through their duty as custodians of the household, in which they strive to promote the healthy continuation of the bloodline in accordance to their personal morality. Marquez portrays women through a selection of prototypical figures that represent the variety of roles within Colombian society. These women see their lives change over the course of the novel as their traditional roles dissolve under the eruption of modernity.

The significance of women to the society depicted by Marquez can only be understood after establishing the limits of their knowledge, because its content directly determines their sphere of power. The knowledge available to women is presented as a paradoxical combination of clairvoyance and ignorance that sets them entirely apart from men. The book starts with Ursula unable to stop her husband from buying the gadgets sold by the gypsies (p11), suggesting a practical knowledge, but also an inability to share it with the men. This knowledge often appears instinctive, such as when Jose Aureliano comes back to Macondo transformed and only Ursula recognises him, suggesting an intuitive link with her family that goes beyond appearances. Her mode of thought is described as 'housewifely logic' (p44)
implying that women can only grasp things that pertain to the domestic realm. This is shown again when Ursula is completely excluded from Colonel Aureliano’s secret operation to leave Macondo, highlighting that women are confined to the household and excluded from war. The men actively perpetuate women’s superstitions, such as when Colonel Aureliano expels parasites to deceive Ursula as to the cause of his drowsiness (p34). However astute women also take advantage of men’s ignorance, particularly Pilar Ternera who makes a business out of reading people’s pasts in her cards during the insomnia plague (p51). Besides her exploitation of the villagers’ beliefs, Pilar Ternera is attributed real clairvoyant powers in her ability to read cards. She predicts many deaths such as Aureliano José’s but cannot convince him to stay at home, which creates the paradox of her prophetic powers and inability to prevent their realisation. Marquez presents other possible paths for women to access higher truths. In ‘the lucidity of old age’ (p250) Ursula gains higher powers of insight, particularly after the onset of her blindness, and Pilar Ternera proposes that 'an alert old age can be more keen than cards' (p251). This suggests that female wisdom is a direct function of time. However the passage of time is double edged for women and when Ursula dies few people come to her funeral because 'there were not many left who remembered her' (p342). Similarly, Rebecca at the end of her life is described as an enlightened being who gained her awareness through solitude (p221), suggesting that contact with society also contributes to keeping women ignorant. Marquez takes a more ambivalent stance towards female ignorance. He establishes a link between ignorance and transcendence in the character of Remedios the Beauty. Her unawareness of men’s desire for her and her virginity form her purity of soul that protects her from the banana plague and culminate in her ascent to heaven. In contrast to her oblivious ignorance, Marquez presents conscious ignorance as exhibited by Amaranta Ursula and Aureliano when they do not consider their possible lineage (p404) as the highest sin that causes the downfall of the bloodline. Thus Marquez suggests a certain degree of choice in
ignorance, and only a genuine inability to overcome it can alchemise it into a value.

Sex is central to the role of women in ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude’, because the successful perpetuation of the bloodline is presented as their main function throughout the book. The nature of female sex is best grasped as a tension between prostitution and virginity, which co-exist in constant conflict and are both considered valuable by society in different circumstances. Marriage is portrayed as a mutually beneficial transaction from the outset when Marquez describes how Ursula and Jose Arcadio Buendia were united through the common business of their families, which created a ‘common prick of consciousness which was stronger than love’ (p24). Marquez expresses here the inability of love alone to ensure the continuation of the family, which instead survives because of mutual interest. Virginity is presented as a core pillar of female honor, particularly at a young age; revealed by Ursula’s reluctance to leave her daughters alone with Pietro Crespi (p64). However later on she actively promotes Amaranta’s marriage to Colonel Marquez (p142), which clearly reveals that virginity decreases in value over time. However, Amaranta, who dies a virgin, refuses him 'in spite of the fact that she was dying to see him' (p142) suggesting that female virginity is a complete overcoming of the passions. Her virginity takes a visible form through the symbol of her black bandage (p151), suggesting that she exhibits it with pride but also needs a constant reminder of her decision. When she dies she declares her conscience clean, thus expressing how this path of self-mastery allowed her to attain to an inner peace despite her hateful life. For the women that do not chose virginity as a vocation however, it is portrayed as worthless and futile. When Marquez describes 'The custom of sending virgins to the bedrooms of soldiers in that same way that hens are turned loose with fine roosters' (p154), he compares the deflowering of women to that of animals, exposing its illusory societal value. He goes further and presents the female urge to preserve a sense of maidenliness after
wedlock as abhorrent when Fernanda refuses to take off her nightgown for intercourse and her husband deems this obscene. In contrast to virginity, which must be struggled for to maintain, prostitution is presented as inherent to the female condition. Pilar Ternera is presented as having 'never refused the countless men that sought her out... without giving her money or love and only occasionally pleasure' (p156), suggesting that women do not always seek compensation for their bodies. However in most cases they seek either the love of a man or money, which is best exemplified by Nigromanta who demands payment from Aureliano when she realises she cannot conquer him. Whereas men have inherent value through their capacity to work, prostitution is the woman’s only concrete value outside of marriage and is thus prone to abuse, as shown with the girl who ‘burned down her grandmother’s house’ and had to whore herself to pay it back (p56). But their ability to enthrall men is also their greatest asset, as shown by Petra Cotes who never doubts her power over Aureliano Segundo because 'she had made a man of him' (p205). Hence whereas virginity is the highest form of self-restrain and honour for a woman, prostitution whether for money or power is the fundamental force driving relationships. The scorn that a conventional woman has for freedom of action of a prostitute is epitomised by Fernanda’s response to Petra Cotes: 'There is no humiliation that a concubine does not deserve' (p353).

Whereas a woman’s main function is sex, their highest duty, which they carry unto death, is the maintenance and protection of the household. This duty sublimates them into a mother figure, epitomized by the character of Ursula, and empowers them as the ultimate custodians and arbiters of justice in the house. When Marquez says that 'Ursula's capacity for work was the same as that of her husband' (p12), he highlights that her usefulness justifies the equality to their husbands that women enjoy within the domestic realm. However, they are presented as having a greater responsibility for the maintenance of the household. When her
husband is absorbed in his misguided obsessions, Ursula takes sole charge of the work (p11), which reveals the unconditional nature of her duties. When Jose Arcadio Buendia is prepared to move his house on a whim, Ursula thwarts his plan by declaring 'If I have to die for the rest of you to stay here, I will die' (p17). Her readiness to lay down her life to guarantee the survival of the family is testament to the personal significance of her role, and her ability to sway her husband’s decision is empowering. Even when Ursula 'had reached an age where she had a right to rest' (p56) she uses her lifelong savings to enlarge the house, another demonstration of willingness to put all her resources at the service of her household. The fact that the 'main reason behind the construction was a desire to have a proper place for the girls to receive visitors' (p63), and thus safeguard later generations of Buendias shows her commitment to her duty beyond the scope of her life. Even in the antechamber of death Ursula prays that a Buendia never marry a kin because 'their children would be born with the tail of a pig' (p342). Here the futility of her lifelong striving to protect the bloodline is revealed, as her prayer is ironically prophetic and she is ultimately unable to prevent the downfall of the line. Thus Marquez presents women as powerful mother figures within their households, but their impotence is that they cannot control the action of their offspring. Although she seeks to preserve the cohesion of the family, Ursula does not hesitate to ostracize her children if they stray from her conception of family. Thus when Rebecca and Jose Arcadio get married she cannot forgive their betrayal of the family spirit and considers that ‘it was as if they (Rebecca and Jose Arcadio) were dead' (p98). Similarly when Arcadio imposes his tyrannical rule over Macondo she overthrows him (p109), but feels 'shame of having raised a monster' (p109). Thus Marquez exalts the duty of women as protector of the household by depicting their higher sense of responsibility and justice. As mothers they always retain power over their children, and Ursula reminds Colonel Aureliano of this when she says 'we have the right to pull down your pants and give you a whipping at the first sign
of disrespect' (p162), underlining that this balance of power is immune to the passage of time. Although war is a sphere of influence limited to men, Ursula asserts the unconditional supremacy of all women within the domestic realm when she tells her son 'You may be in command of your war, but I'm in command of my house' (p168).

Women are thus established as supreme custodians of the household, but their behaviour within it is shaped to a large extent by a rigid tradition which further delimits the realm of their power. Throughout the novel, elements of progress disrupt this set of customs and create a tension in the women between their instinct to retreat towards tradition and their growing possibilities to overcome it. Tradition crystallises female power within specific aspects of domestic life, such as the process of mourning. When a character dies, only the women seem have the right to impose periods of mourning, which implies a greater sensibility to the value of human life than men. However women seem to obtain their customs from different sources, and this can best be understood through the contrast between Fernanda and Ursula. Whereas Fernanda seeks to impose the rigid customs of her ancestors on her new family, Ursula’s customs had 'origins that came more from inspiration than from tradition' (p213). However, all women seem to find the foundation of their tradition in their past, and seek to pass it on to later generations. Although they often fail to promote behavioural tradition, they can achieve partial success through material possessions that ensure the immortalisation of the family. Thus Ursula prevents Colonel Aureliano from destroying the daguerreotype of Remedios, claiming that it had become a ‘family relic’ (p177). Marquez summarises Fernanda’s tradition when she says 'calamities should not be used as a pretext for any relaxation in customs' (p318), whereas Ursula’s customs are a pragmatic response to current reality. Fernanda appears willing to devote her life to preserve her inflexible customs, such as when she claims she would rather die than put herself in the hands of a French doctor
The futility of such scrupulous tradition is expressed by the irony that she herself is a foreigner to Macondo, and that she gradually must accept change for her offspring. During the introduction of new inventions into Macondo, 'respectable ladies disguised themselves as workers to observe the novelty of the phonograph' (p226), which highlights that women want to be part of progress but are initially left out. The character of Meme symbolises the gateway for female progress. Her talent at the clavichord gets her invited to the Texan Mr Brown's house and represents a portal into a new culture (p275). She manages to free herself from the ‘compromise that she had accepted not so much out of obedience as out of convenience' (p270) and overcome the traditional role of women. However this breakdown of conventions is brought to fruition by Amaranta Ursula when she goes to study in Brussels and comes back with a husband. The fact that she forces him to wear a leash (p376) and refuses to leave Macondo even if she lost a husband (p392) symbolise the modern woman’s emancipation from man. Her destruction of 'articles of superstition' (p377) is also testimony to her education and rationality which allowed her to overcome female superstition. Progress is thus presented as an inevitable force that alters the foundation of female traditional roles. Remedios witnessing the banana plantation 'as if it had been an experience in a dream' (p235) proves that even when it leads to suffering, progress creates an awe that cannot be resisted and dissolves the boundaries of female convention.

Overall, Marquez anchors the role of women in the routine of daily reality. Unlike the men, they never abandon their responsibilities and remain deeply pragmatic, guided by their unswerving morality which defines their lives and is beyond good and evil. They are admirable for their tenacity to exercise power within the limited spheres available to them, and show a great concern for the transcendence of their bloodline through family. Their position as observers to the frenzy of men grants them unparalleled wisdom and allows them
to witness the cyclical nature of time.
Bibliography

Gabriel Garcia Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude (NY: Harper Perennial, 2006)