

Manipulation of Memory and Post-Truth Politics in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch*

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Abstract: The idea of memory and its arbitrariness, used as a crutch by politicians to buttress the political circus created by them in their claimed nations, states, boundaries, etc., is being explored and talked about a great deal in the slippery times of today. The theoretical scientific idea of a parallel world has probably been brought to reality by the propagandistic's constant disguising of the real. Two or more parallel versions of history exist almost everywhere in the world today relatively because of political intervention. This alteration of facts and distortion of collective memory and truths has been explored through subtle sarcasm by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014) in *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975). The political culture of exercising media as a medium to distort the 'real', to give space to the 'contorted real', so that the difference between the two becomes arbitrary and haphazard and that the thin line between the two contraries vanishes and they are projected as a blend, in a politically convenient fashion, is the prime topic of discussion in this research paper. This article critically and vehemently focuses on the instances of political manipulation and control of memory by a narcissistic dictator and how it impinges upon the contemporary post-truth era.

Key Terms: Dictatorship, Memory, Manipulation, Paranoia, Politics, Post-truth, Propaganda

The area of Memory Studies is believed to use memory as a tool to examine, explore and remember the past. It has a broad scope and is inclusive in nature because of its multidisciplinary nature. In a 2008 article, authors Roediger and Wertsch comment on the scope of this study field, "The multidisciplinary field of memory studies combines intellectual strands from many domains, including ... anthropology, education, literature, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology" (9). Memory Studies is more inclined towards the collective past of a cultural or political group of people

than the history of individual people. Scholar Tanja E. Bosch writes, “Memory studies is thus a multidisciplinary field which began with individual memory growing outward to focus on broader dimensions of social memory and the politics of public remembering, especially those channelled through communications media” (2). The subject field has been more popular in countries which have had a past filled with instability and political anarchy or are still in search of a balance for their social and political framework; the countries with their past woven around violence, conflict, political and cultural shifts, etc. Memory Studies engages with large communities of people and explore why there are certain occurrences that the masses remember and why the rest of them are almost wiped from their memories. The revision and deliberate restructuring of a nation’s historical memory is often a calculated action undertaken by governments in order to revamp their public perception. A whole amount of new and good memories are associated by these governments with their own names in order to ingratiate the citizens of their countries. One such example of the distortion of historical memory from world history is put forth by German-American sociologist Lewis A. Coser in the introduction to Maurice Halbwach’s book *On Collective Memory* (1992). Coser notes:

Talking with Soviet colleagues in the last few years, I was struck again and again by a degree of hesitancy on their part when we discussed recent events in the Soviet Union. It dawned on me after a while that these people had been forced in the last few years to shed their own collective memory-like skin and reconstruct a largely different set of collective memories. All the major historical figures of the past who had been killed, slandered, and vilified under Stalin’s bloody reign were now shown to have been good Bolsheviks and major revolutionary heroes. The whole Soviet history of the last seventy years had to be rewritten. Needless to say, the new history books often had their own biases, but they were at one in demolishing the old. (21-22)

The analysis of this ‘collective memory’ of various societies is undertaken by historians in order to retrace the past of a community, as the creation of collective memory is often influenced by history. The referred term *collective memory* was first propounded by Hugo Van Hofmannsthal. The credit

for the concept behind it and its development, however, is given to Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945). According to him, collective memory is a socially constructed notion. To quote Coser again, “It is, of course, individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context, draw on that context to remember or recreate the past” (22). Coser gives the example of his new friendship with the Native Americans after his move to America. He describes his relationship with them as estranged, and he was at first unable to locate the barrier between these bonds. It was only after he remembered Halbwachs’s work on memory that he was able to decipher that there were not enough collective memories between him and the Native Americans. ‘Collective memory’ can refer to a cluster of memories that is shared by individuals in a group or social institution. Each group has their own distinctive contexts, and the memories, therefore, are drawn from these contexts. These memories are shared by said groups and are important for any nation as they reflect their past and history. A heritage can be traced by focusing on these memories. This action of retracing, nonetheless, tends to get erroneous, as memory as a criterion is unreliable and immeasurable. Zheng Wang, in his book *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict* (2017), remarks, “The politics of collective memory - impossible to quantify, hard to measure with the methods of survey research, yet still very real - is a major ingredient of ... the policy setting in every country” (1). Relying heavily on memories while conducting rational research around retracing and revisiting the past gets fairly arbitrary, as the varied recollections of the past are not always objective and stable. Accordingly, it becomes elementary to manipulate the collective memory of groups as it is dynamic and is always in a state of flux. Manipulation of memory refers to the mending of the memories and the worldview of the masses in a manner which is convenient and advantageous for the manipulators. This phenomenon can be witnessed during a study of the political framework of a state controlled by monolithic political management. In his observation on Michael Oswald’s book *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism* (2022), Rafat Riedel writes, “Memory manipulations—as understood by social scientists ... can be defined as an influence organised by societal actors (individuals, institutions, groups) advancing the interests of the manipulator by instrumentalising history and

memory. This means such a (re)creation of collective memory which serves the interests, visions and ideologies of the manipulating actor(s)” (203).

These characteristics of the arbitrariness of memory, the political manipulation of the collective memory of communities, and the idea of historical revisionism with the aim of controlling and re-chiselling the existing memories of the masses in a manner which is profitable to the cause of the politicians, etc., are some of the ideas related to the memory studies which are discussed in this paper.

The Autumn of the Patriarch projects the uncertainty of the nature of memory in virtually all the events that unfold, where the conscious politics of memory distortion becomes cyclical and ubiquitous. The novel is a complex mosaic of long and enduring ramblings of distinct voices, all of which conjoin at the locus of discussing a powerful and tyrant dictator known as the General. This ruler, who is taken as a central character by Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014) to satirise many actual dictators of the mid-twentieth century, resembles the archetypal despot. Raymond L. Williams, in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views* (2006), records how there was an era of military totalitarianism in the Latin American countries in the 1970s, which birthed many novels based on the theme of dictatorship, military rule and abuse of power:

The decade of the 1970s saw the startling empowerment of military dictatorships in Latin America ... major novelists, such as Alejo Carpentier, Augusto Roa Bastos, and García Márquez all published novels on dictators, “Carpentier’s *Reasons of State* appeared in 1974 and Roa Bastos’s *Yo el Supremo (I, the supreme)* in the following year. García Márquez had begun his project at the end of a dictatorship ... that of Pérez Jiménez, ruler of Venezuela during the 1950s.” (123)

Though the novel does not mention the dictatorial state’s name, it is evidently based on Latin American countries. The story of the General becomes a stark exhibition of the indoctrination where our beliefs and memories are distorted in a way that appeases the cause of the regimes and where the masses become mere pawns in the wily game of throne politics. The paranoid dictator, in many

instances, tries to alter the facts and suppresses reality with the sheer use of power. He goes to fathomless extremes in order to establish his might. He even gets the conception of nature and natural phenomenon challenged so much so that:

as the lights in his bedroom went on before the cocks began to crow, the reveille of the presidential guard gave the notice of the new day to the nearby Conde barracks ... and lettered politicians and dauntless adulators who proclaimed him the corrector of earthquakes, eclipses, leap years and other errors of God ... the clock in the tower should not strike twelve at twelve o'clock but two times so that life would seem longer, the order was carried out. (6-7)

This extreme exercise of control over the minds and memory of the people can be viewed as a prominent motif in the text. At the very beginning of the novel, the General fakes his own death by fashioning the corpse of his body double in a particular manner, as he wants to see what impact his death has on his nation, which supposedly could not function without him. "How was it that the sun had risen and had risen again without stumbling, why that Sunday look, mother, why the same heat without me" (23). Evidently, he dies multiple times throughout his life and always comes back to life, and there is a belief among the people that he could control his own death:

The second time he was found, chewed away by vultures in the same office, wearing the same clothes and in the same position... no evidence of his death was final because there was always another truth behind the truth... the more certain the rumours of his death seemed, he would appear even more alive. (37-38)

The deliberately created befuddlement around the death of the General is symbolic of the use of memory manipulation as a fundamental tool to obfuscate the knowledge and the memories of the masses. This tool entails the prominent concept of post-truth, which, according to Lee McIntyre, "amounts to a form of ideological supremacy whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not" (13). Predominantly, this coercion takes place via the apparent tool of education. The adulator historians in the State of the

General play a vital part in meddling with and transforming the memories of people, which shows how power is inevitably concentrated in the hands of the authorities and the government. The description of the General, as recorded by the history textbooks, stands in stark contradiction to the truth that the satirical narration displays. “Contrary to what his clothing showed, the descriptions made by his historians made him very big” (39). In addition to the mending of the truth by the historians, the school textbooks further alter the reality and employ manipulation to play a vital role as:

official schoolboy texts referred to him as a patriarch of huge size who never left his house because he could not fit through the doors, who loved children and swallows, who knew the language of certain animals, who had the virtue of being able to anticipate the designs of nature, who could guess a person’s thoughts by one look in the eyes, and who had the secret of salt with the virtue of curing lepers’ sores and making cripples walk. (39-40)

Other than this, the school textbooks tell a divine story about the birth of the patriarch, “his mother ... Bendición Alvarado to whom the school texts attributed the miracle of having conceived him without recourse to any male and of having received in a dream the hermetical keys to his messianic destiny” (40). Other than history books and school textbooks being the instruments of slick manipulation through mass communication, newspapers also become the mouthpieces of the dictator. Newspapers portray the General as a strong and noble leader who works incessantly for the progress of the nation:

The few newspapers still publishing were still dedicated to proclaiming his eternity ... every day, they displayed him to us ... on the front page in his tenacious uniform ... with more authority and diligence and better health than ever ... in the usual pictures, he was once more dedicating well-known monuments or public installations that no one knew about in real life, he presided over solemn ceremonies which they said had taken place yesterday but which had really taken place during the last century. (106-07)

The paranoia which comes with power leads to further consolidation of said power, usually through desperate means. The General can be seen as an extraordinarily paranoid and isolated individual who is gravely suspicious of everyone around him. His compulsive need to re-check his surroundings for any possible threats, his obsession with the constant surveillance of people with the help of spies, his urge to keep himself away and detached from everyone, etc., end up compelling him to act in an abominable manner. The fear of being replaced or killed makes him make preemptive killings of people. The horrendous killing of and the serving-up of the corpse of his close confidant, General Rodrigo de Aguillar, whom he suspects of betrayal, on a dinner table with a duly decorated vegetable platter is one such example of an appalling. This paranoia also leads him to spread lies about himself and his family. Further, to make sure that people do not remember his mother as an ordinary individual and a tyrant's relative after her death, the General meddles with his mother's corpse and concocts the demise story. He had ordered his mother's body to be preserved with the help of cosmetic tricks and taxidermy, with the intent of displaying it to the general public and showing to them how the virtue of Benediction Alvarado has kept even her mortal remains fresh. "When the truth was quite something else, your excellency, it was that the body of his mother was not preserved because of her virtues ... but she had been stuffed according to the worst skills of taxidermy just like the posthumous animals in science museums" (130).

A quintessence of post-truth is a search for the truth and re-checking of facts. The truth is usually a faint sliver of reality that is thrashed and overshadowed by the massive and created truths in such a state as the Generals. Ironically, this dictator employs people to find truths and check facts about certain things. It can be seen that the General does so because he has started believing in the delusional versions of realities that he has constructed about himself and his family, and he merely wants an adulatory fact checker to solidify those ideas. In one such episode, the General employed Demetrius Aldous, a member of the sacred congregation, to find the real truth about his mother's sainthood in the hope of getting favoured reassurance and validation for himself. The harsh truths put forth by Demetrius Aldous, however, shock him and make him realise the blurred reality that he

himself has been living in, owing to his flatterer ministers. As an obvious consequence of the courage to speak the truth in the presence of a despot, public expulsion and other harsh punishments are ordered for all the men and women of the holy congregation. “There was ordered the immediate, public and solemn expulsion of his grace the archbishop ... followed by that of bishops, ... priests, nuns and ... the business of God” (133).

Another vital tool termed ‘historical negationism’ is axiomatically used in a dictatorship to ensure the undisputed status and power of a dictator. It is the deliberate deletion or denial of the real history. It is often supplemented with historical revisionism, where the real history is revamped and replaced according to the suitability of the person or people in the political power. We find these phenomena, along with the absolute use of stifling power in the lottery incident in the novel, wherein, again, the absurdity of absolute power becomes highlighted. The General seems to participate in a national lottery draw, which is rigged so that he wins it every single time, and the reward is often something big. To show that the lottery scheme is fair and unbiased, innocent little children are asked to draw the winning balls. Once a child participates in the draw, he/she is secretly kidnapped by the General’s men and is forever kept in captivity thereafter so that there is no witness to the fraud and corruption that occurs in the national competition. The parents of the children in the state do desperate things in order to save their kids. “... because the rumour had spread that once the children went up they didn’t come back down, their parents hid them, they buried them alive while the raiding parties that sought them in the middle of the night passed” (91). When this news about mass kidnappings gets leaked to the League of Nations, their forces come to the General’s country in search of truth and find the two thousand children that are reportedly lost. Here, we find the interestingly grotesque attempt of the General’s men to get rid of the children. Firstly, they hide them, and then they massacre these hundreds of children for the purpose of saving the vain name and worthless power of their dictator:

Goddamn, it, he had forgotten completely what will we do with the children ... he had them take the children out of their hiding place in the jungle and carry them off in the opposite

direction to the provinces of perpetual rain where there were no treasonous winds to spread their voices, where the animals of the earth rotted away as they walked ... he ordered them taken to the Andean grottoes of perpetual mists so that no one would find out where they were, ... so that the Red Cross airplanes would not discover them, ... before dawn he ordered them to put the children in a barge loaded with cement, take them singing to the limits of the territorial waters, blow them up with a dynamite charge without giving them time to suffer as they kept on singing. (93-94)

The chain of lies and the cruelty goes to the extremes of truth distortion when, right after the execution of these children, the General refuses to accept that anything of this sort ever took place. In a conversation with his comrade, the faint guilt of the General is addressed by the former by negating the fact that the mass execution ever took place as, “he said without changing expression not to believe rumours spread by traitors, old friend, the children are growing up in God’s peace” (98). On several occasions this appalling incident is unacknowledged. Another of these is when the General is addressing Ambassador Evans, “I don’t know what children you’re talking about since your own country’s delegate to the League of Nations has made a public statement that the children in the schools are all there and in good health” (98).

The subjective truths created by the General are believed in by the populace as they are robbed of their agency. People do not have the option of exercising their choices before their oppressor, who dwells in the delusory bubble of self-proclaimed godliness. The climate of adulation propagandises the General to think of himself as a god-like figure who has divine origins and who can perform miracles. Such beliefs in the mind of the General segregate him from his ordinary citizens, and he deems himself an exceptional human who has an unquestioned sanction to materialise his whims at the cost of the suffering of his citizens. He adjudges himself as an absolute and perfect leader. As this sort of totality vehemently evades the post-truth times, the General eventually loses his authority and becomes nugatory towards the final years of his life. Marquez’s jumbled voices of narration show how the masses are obligated to form connections with the contorted reality so that they have an

emotionally biased perspective of the truth. This becomes somewhat similar to Stephen Colbert's concept of 'truthiness' which, as Lee McIntyre states in his book *Post-Truth* (2018), is "defined as being persuaded by whether something *feels* true, even if it is not necessarily backed up by the facts" (5). The book becomes a perfect example of how, in a dictatorial state, the opinions as well as memories of people do not only matter but are also controlled.

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