Marquez’s Macondo as a Representation of the World and its Ecology

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Abstract

The paper interprets Gabriel García Marquez’s seminal novel One Hundred Years of Solitude through the lens of Ecocriticism, and argues how Marquez disguises Macondo as an island to present the village as a world within itself and represents the world’s ecosystem through it.
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Abstract

Islands have an extensive history of being projected as a world within themselves, having a utopian environment and a balanced ecosystem. The finitude of island spaces indicates towards the boundary of resources humans are approaching. And the gradual depletion of islands’ environment stands as a metonymic representation of planetary ecological destruction. In his epoch-defining novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude, Gabriel Garcia Marquez sets the narrative in the village of Macondo, founded by the leading Buendia family and some other inhabitants. Marquez creates the village as an allegory of an island, made evident in the initial chapters of the novel. This paper analyses the allegorical relationship between the gradual ruination of Macondo’s ecosystem with that of the world, and attempts to explain how Marquez employs this allegory to raise the environmental issues of our age.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecology, Marquez, Islands, Global Warming
Introduction:

In ecocritical studies, the Anthropocene is a term used to refer to an era that started with the Industrial Revolution and hasn't ended yet, and is distinguished by rising human pollution and irreversible environmental effects (Morton, "Poisoned Ground," 2013).¹ The recreation of this epoch can be noticed in the degrading conditions of the islands which were untouched in the past but have found themselves captured by the “progressive” hands. As Fredric Jameson observes, “in order to understand the world,... a being of such enormous complexity that it can only be mapped and modelled indirectly,” we need “a simpler object that stands as its allegorical interpretant.” Islands can be considered those “allegorical interpretants”² that Jameson is referring to since islands have always been represented either as utopian places for their nearly impeccable environmental settings or as dystopian for their isolation and disconnection from the rest of the world. This way, islands represent that ideal stage of our planet which was yet to witness human intervention and its subsequent impacts on the planet’s ecology, environment, and overall natural order. This image of islands emerged as a result of a long history of European colonisation, where the Europeans gradually usurped the resources of the islands they colonised. This reflected the effects of various civilizations upon the earth’s ecosystem and its limited resources. In the words of the historian Richard H. Grove,

“The isolated oceanic island, like the frail ships on the great scientific circumnavigations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, directly stimulated the emergence of a detached self-consciousness and a critical view of European origins and behaviour, of the kind dramatically prefigured by Daniel Defoe in Robinson Crusoe. Thus the island easily became, in

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¹ The term "Anthropocene" was first used by Nobel laureate scientist Paul Crutzen and scientist Eugene Stoermer in 2000 when they published their "proposal for the designation of a new geological time period called the 'Anthropocene,' a term intended to capture the ‘central role of mankind’ in planetary geological and ecological processes since at least the eighteenth century” (Anderson ix).

practical environmental as well as mental terms, an easily conceived allegory of a whole world.

Contemporary observations of the ecological demise of islands were easily converted into premonitions of environmental destruction on a more global scale.”

My paper adopts this view of island to interpret Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as in how Marquez attempts to delude his readers into believing that Macondo, the setting of the novel, is an island, in order to reflect the bigger issues of the planet through the ‘island as a planet’ allegory. It's important to note, though, that some readers and reviewers have looked into the idea of Macondo as an island as a symbolic interpretation of the town's seclusion from the outside world. According to this perspective, Macondo is viewed as an island because it is isolated from the mainland both geographically and culturally and because it is a separate community with its own distinct history, customs, and traditions. A close reading of the text reveals such instances that implicitly direct the readers to believe that Macondo is a water-locked place where no connection with other civilizations can be established. This leads Macondo to be falsely seen as an island and furthermore, to be an allegorical representation of the planet, so that this work by Marquez can be placed in the larger framework of the ecological disourse.

**Literature Review:**

*An Eco-Critical Reading of One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Raymond L. Williams, in the conventional sense, qualifies as an ecocritical study. He makes an effort to highlight the complex networks and structures of nature of multiple sources, many of which are composed of more human than non-human elements. He points out that the book doesn't overtly embrace nature and reject anything modern, rather both are innocently celebrated without being mixed

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together. Williams' ecological research uses references from a wide range of works, giving you a glimpse into the development and history of ecological studies in the subject of literature. After providing background information on the topic and the novels that essentially precede *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in this regard, he progressively turns his attention to explaining the latter. Explaining this he comments that “Undoubtedly *Maria* and *The Vortex* are key predecessors to Garcia Marquez’s representation of nature and technology in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*” (Williams, 32). This positioning of Marquez in a particular place in the sequence of writings concerned with environment gives the ecocritical criticism a chronology to follow. The event of seminal importance in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is when the government soldiers massacre the banana workers to trample down their strike. Williams mentions *The Big House* by Alvaro Cepeda Samundio as its noteworthy predecessor as it is situated in the town of Cienaga, the site where the incident took place in 1928. This helps in understanding where Marquez drew his inspiration from as he was growing in the troubled times in the history of Columbia. The politics of the colonisers further jeopardised the ecosystem of a naturally rich nation of the Latin Americas.

This is further explained in detail by Eman Mohammed ElSherief in his research article “Political Ecology in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude.*” This essay is significant because it introduces the concept of Political Ecology and shows how it develops in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which relates to my argument. ElSherief explains that political ecology was a term used to refer broadly to the social, economic, and political contexts that underlay the causes, experiences, and management of environmental challenges as the ecological philosophy continued to advance. He investigates political ecology and discovers that the conflict in the book is founded on cruel monopolistic practices that a minority imposes on the
rest of the population. ElSherief asserts that Macondo's demise was caused by these monopolistic practices. This claim is supported by García Márquez's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which the author expresses his wish for “a new and sweeping utopia of life … where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth” (cited in Ortega 91). Political ecology plays a key role in my essay; it is a fundamental intersection of ecological and political economy. It aids in understanding the extent and dynamics of political ecology because when the banana company is established in Macondo, Marquez employs this establishment as a political grip over many aspects of the village including the ecological uniformity. ElSherief agrees that Marquez provides an idyllic backdrop for the town to demonstrate what was before the current, doomed society. To this end, he remarks importantly, “Marquez portrayed Macondo as a paradise-like locale, wrapped with serenity, idyll, and magnificent natural beauty, an image that will be thoroughly reversed when the book comes to an end” (ElSherief, 15).

Why this representation of Macondo as a “paradise-like locale” matters can be understood by Elizabeth Deloughrey’s book, Allegories of the Anthropocene. For, in the final chapter of the book, she describes how an island is a world within itself. The chapter titled "An Island Is a World" highlights the symbolism of the island as a world. It establishes the connection and similarity between the earth and its limited resources and the finitude of island spaces. The general belief that islands constitute a world within themselves and that any vicious harm inflicted upon their ecosystem by humans directly reflects on a larger scale the dangerous effects of human activities on the world's ecosystem is further explained as to how the part-for-whole function of allegory applies significantly to the islands. I adopt this understanding of the islands and apply it to the village of Macondo, contending that Marquez used the island metaphor to
allegorically discuss the state of the global ecosystem and the severe effects that extreme
deforestation, colonisation, industrialization, and other ostensibly progressive human actions
have on it.

Some other critics include Diva Marcela Piamba Tulcán who examines the connection
between the Macondo community and its natural environment in her analysis of One Hundred
Years of Solitude, which offers a distinctive ecocritical reading of the novel. She also discusses
how the novel effectively evokes the close emotional and physical interdependence that exists
among Colombian Caribbean living beings. Additionally, Raymond L. Williams notes that One
Hundred Years represents "the total story (and history) of Macondo from an oral, pre-writing
society to its development as a sophisticated writing culture in the final chapters" (116).
Concerning this utopian world, Rosario Curiel makes the observation that humans and nature
coexisted peacefully in this ideal state in the early phases of Macondo. She also suggests that this
paradise was caused by anthropocentric domination over nature.

Furthermore, this utopian view of Macondo is explored by Peter G. Earle in his “Utopía,
Universópolis, Macondo,” published in the Hispanic Review. Earle describes utopia and its
numerous meanings in this essay, based on the works of Plato, Thomas More, and other authors.
Earle's further discussions about utopia bring up the hamlet of Macondo, an invention of
Marquez in One Hundred Years of Solitude. This village's environment and origin seem utopian
in the sense that it was created from scratch by a visionary man named Jose Arcadio Buendia,
who afterwards undertook several scientific excursions for the implied welfare of humanity. He
refers to Macondo as a "mythical village that forms a mythical island," (Earle, 7) which supports
my assertion that Marquez is successful in deluding his readers into believing that Macondo is an
island. He then takes advantage of this to depict Macondo as a world unto itself and establish
parallels between the deteriorating ecosystem of the initially utopian Macondo and the gradual decay of the world's ecosystem. Earle claims that Macondo created a new "Garden of Eden" for the readers, suggesting that Macondo's creation is just as environmentally ideal as Eden's Garden and alludes to the beginning of the period during which the ecosystem was at its healthiest. After the discussion about islands comes full circle, the impact of climate change upon these entities needs to be included in the discussion too.

Heather Lazrus in his article, “Sea Change: Island Communities and Climate Change,” published in Annual Review of Anthropology, offers insights into the challenges island communities around the globe have to face due to the anthropogenic influence upon nature and climate. His review of the research in the study of climate change reflects the diversity that pervades the category of island consisting of a variety of geographic, political, and environmental units. Though his focus is on Pacific Island communities, he includes examples from various communities to show the similarities and differences faced by them around the globe. He discusses issues such as temperature, sea levels, hurricanes, rainfall et cetera. This helps me understand the effects of climate change upon island communities and find its parallels in the novel. This article plays a seminal role in the progress of my close reading of the novel and in my attempt to trace the events of the novel which eventually lead to the ecological destruction of Macondo and of its people.

**Forming the Idea of an Island:**

In environmental literature, islands can be used as a metaphor for the fragility of the planet's ecosystems, highlighting how even small changes can have a significant impact on the delicate balance of nature. Islands can also represent biodiversity hotspots, where unique species have evolved in isolation from the mainland. Thus Marquez, from the very first sentence of the
novel, begins to weave the web that would result in Macondo being considered an island. The opening sentence of the novel reads, “Many years later as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (Marquez, 1). The use of the word “discover” here gives the sense of coming across something that has not been found before, even though it’s a trivial thing of daily life. A few paragraphs later, while describing the region around the village, he writes, “Built on the bank of a river of clean water, ran along a bed of polished stones which were white & enormous like prehistoric eggs” (Marquez, 1) This sentence has two references to the utopian view of islands, the first one is the river of clean water which shows no sign of contamination and the other is polished stones, signifying zero footfall. In another instance, he unambiguously notes that, “The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them, it was necessary to point” (Marquez, 1). Along with this, the inhabitants of Macondo are described as being traditional, solitary, and possessing their own distinctive practices and beliefs. This projects them as a distinct community which has a separate place in the world and is untouched by the outside forces. Although Macondo is not portrayed as an island in the book, the concept of being cut off from the outside world is a recurrent theme. When the mysterious gypsies arrive in the village, each time they display a new invention of the world, first the magnet, then the magnifying glass, and then the telescope. These things are common to the outside world but in the village of Macondo, they’re showcased as inventions. Marquez brings all this build-up of a remote setting to a conclusion when the founders of Macondo set out on an expedition to find new civilizations, and after months of crossing mountains, forests, and riverbanks, they come across a sea, and the protagonist exclaims, “God damnit! Macondo is surrounded by water on all
sides.” This may turn out to be a miscalculation later in the novel but it manifests the idea of an island in the readers early on.

**The Invasion and its Consequences:**

Island ecosystems are often highly vulnerable to invasive species, as they have evolved in isolation from other land masses and may lack natural defences against introduced species. This can be seen as a reflection of how the introduction of non-native species can disrupt the delicate balance of ecosystems on a global scale. Marquez introduces the invasive tendency of humans early in the novel when the arrival of the natives Visitación and Cataure from La Guajira, Colombia, who come to Macondo fleeing from an evil that attacked their tribe. This evil is an insomnia plague which is highly contagious. Soon after the invasion of this tribe, Macondo is infested by the insomnia plague which signifies the vulnerability of island communities to foreign contact. Visitación is a Spanish word which in English translates, quite obviously, to “visitation,” another emblem for an invasion if done uninvitingly. Marquez leaves a trail of such hints throughout the novel which subconsciously keep reminding the readers of the themes he is brooding over through the story, its events, and the characters.

Although her brother, Cataure, flees the village, Visitación admits the circumstances of the plague and explains to the central Buendía family that the loss of sleep is not the gravest part of the disease, “but its inexorable evolution toward a more critical manifestation: A loss of memory.” In addition, Visitación describes the manner in which once the person “became used to his state of vigil, the recollection of his childhood began to be erased from his memory, then the name and the notion of things, and finally, the identity of people and even the awareness of his one being, until he sank into a kind of idiocy that had no past.” There are two themes underlying this phenomenon in the novel. One is ecology, and the other one is colonialism. Humans in the
past have brought upon themselves deadly pandemics like the Great Plague majorly due to their own actions. Whenever human beings have meddled with the affairs of Nature, calamities of such magnitude have befallen them. Marquez attempts to surface this issue through the spread of insomnia plague in Macondo. Another aspect of looking at it is from the perspective of a postcolonial reader. This plague is carried to Macondo by the outsiders which proves the vulnerability of natives to foreign contact. Colonisers around the world have not only imported their cultural values, lifestyles, and manners into the colonised spaces but have also introduced the latter to diseases that might have been unknown to them until that point of time. Many diseases were brought into the mainlands of the Americas by Europeans which proved fatal for the Native Americans. Marquez squeezes such historic references into the novel at every turn. Macondo was described by Marquez as a paradise-like setting, shrouded in tranquility, idyll, and breathtaking natural beauty. This portrayal will be completely inverted as the novel comes to a finish, which will further exacerbate the horrific realisations that are made there. Marquez allowed the Macondo experience to transcend all geographical and temporal borders, not only representing Latin American nations but also all post-colonial communities. This was accomplished without evidencing the nation in which Macondo exists.

Additionally, the expedition mentioned earlier which was undertaken by the founders of Macondo provides the evidence for the beginning of the destruction of the ecosystem that consequently brings about the destruction of the village. Marquez writes: “The men on the expeditions felt overwhelmed by their most ancient memories in that paradise of dampness and silence, going back to before original sin, as their boots sank into pools of steaming oil and their

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4 “The arrival and settlement of Europeans in the Americas resulted in what is known as the Columbian exchange. Europeans brought new infectious diseases, including smallpox, bubonic plague, chickenpox, cholera, the common cold, diphtheria, influenza, malaria, measles, scarlet fever, sexually transmitted diseases” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_American_disease_and_epidemics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_American_disease_and_epidemics)
machetes destroyed bloody lilies and golden salamanders. For a week, almost without speaking, they went ahead like sleepwalkers through a universe of grief, lighted only by the tenuous reflection of luminous insects, and their lungs were overwhelmed by a suffocating smell of blood” (11-12).

This foreshadows the impending doom of nature around the place. Later in the novel, the establishment of the notorious banana factory works as the last nail in the coffin, because it brings again the same two themes which pervade the novel: ecology and colonialism. The establishment of a factory directly results in the usurping of the resources that exist around the place and also the contamination of the “clean” water of the river. The waste produced by the factories largely results in the spoilage of water bodies nearby.

Furthermore, when the Banana Company entered the village, it immediately began to make significant modifications to the native people's way of life, building an irrigation system, their own railway, telegraph system, retail stores and a sizable fleet to transport bananas to the United States (Regina, 1984, pp. 93–94). Thus, the Banana zone had a tangible flux of prosperity up until the 1930s. However, the surrounding natural environment and the Macondo proletariat were equally destroyed by the Banana company's callous and horrifying policies, whose garbage bridged over the river and altered the picturesque Macondo landscape. The nearly five years long rainfall that brings about the destruction of Macondo is the culmination of all human activity in and around Macondo, including the massacre that banana company is responsible for. The government makes the rainfall an excuse to clean its hands off the killings. In “the official version, repeated a thousand times and mangled out all over the country by every means of communication the government found at hand, was finally accepted: there were no dead, the

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5 Marquez refers to the river as having clean water earlier in the novel.
satisfied workers had gone back to their families, and the banana company was suspending all activity until the rains stopped” (p. 315).

This symbolises the tendency of human nature to mask their own shortcomings and hide behind the veil of nature to escape the confrontation. The five years long rainfall signified a possibility of an apocalypse if human beings continued wresting the natural resources for their own gains. Moore (2010) asserts that what constitute ecological regimes are, "relatively durable patterns of class structure, technological innovation, and the development of productive forces......that have sustained and propelled successive phases of world accumulation" (p. 405). Thus, the exhausted ecology in Macondo has conducted a four year insurrectionary fight against the destructive ecological regime of the Banana monoculture due to "the relative exhaustion of an ecological revolution" (Deckard, p. 19).

Conclusion:

Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his remarkable novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude, portrays the story of a village, disguising it as an island, to display the place where the planet is heading due to human intervention. The metaphorical paradise, Macondo, is driven to ruins by the activities of its inhabitants and those of the outsiders. It reflects the state of environment that this planet was initially home to and raises his concerns over where it might be leading. He employs various themes to the narrative and brings them all together but the highlighted themes remain those of colonialism, magic realism, and environmentalism. Marquez juxtaposes a supposed island and its ecosystem with the planet and draws the conclusion of the planet’s doomed future.
Bibliography


