Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *No One Writes to the Colonel*: Demythification of El Dorado and the Matrices of Violence and Hunger

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Abstract

In almost all his major works Gabriel Garcia Marquez has persistently returned to Colombian / Latin American history and politics, more so, to the miasma of colonial rule and postcolonial disillusionment. The experiences of Colombia’s Spanish past, her postcolonial political reality, revolutions ending in autocracy, split of the nation into Liberals and Conservatives, rebellions, violence, civil war, emergence of cocaine empires – all have gone into the making of the plinth of his fiction. *No One Writes to the Colonel* bears a strong relevance to the Latin American history of revolutions and independence, and its shift from collective dreams to hellish nightmares in the very passage from colonial engagement to disengagement. The present paper attempts an examination of Garcia Marquez’s ironical demythification of El Dorado via the story of a seventy-five year old war veteran whose contribution towards the nation’s independence remains unrecognized and unrewarded by the country he once fought for or by the government he often fought against. This paper will also examine how hunger and violence, as new matrices, strongly critique the myth of decolonization again through the colonel who, in a theoretically decolonized space, continues negotiating with the old colonial syndromes for true postcolonial economic and political emancipation.

**El Dorado Past**

In his Nobel Address, 1982 Gabriel Garcia Marquez alluded to the European myth of El Dorado as a signifier of the colonial greed that lurked behind and beyond the mission of exploration prompting a massive diaspora of the European invaders and colonizers:

El Dorado, our so avidly sought and illusory land, appeared on numerous maps for many a long year, shifting its place and form to suit the fantasy of the cartographers… one of the many unfathomable mysteries of that age is that of the eleven thousand mules, each loaded with one hundred pounds of gold, that left Cuzco one day to pay the ransom of Atahualpa and never reached their destination. Subsequently, in colonial times, hens were sold in Cartagena de Indias, that had been raised on alluvial land and whose gizzards contained tiny lumps of gold. ("Nobel Lecture" 87)

El Dorado, meaning “the Golden” in Spanish, is the mythical land of gold located in the South America, constituted of seven golden cities, and ruled by a fabulously rich king who had the luxury of powdering himself with gold dust. This set the Spanish explorers like Francisco Vazquez De Coronado and the English explorers like Sir Walter Raleigh to undertake excruciating expeditions in the 16th century in search of El Dorado. The 16th century was also the period of military conquest in Spanish

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America, colonization of lands and peoples, evangelization, exploration and mapping of the Americas while the whole process left a trail of acculturation, hybridity and deracination in the wake. The three-century-long Spanish occupation was initiated and expanded on the premises of hypothetical El Dorado which in the course of colonial rule got transformed into an extended metaphor of alien infiltration and overlordship. The myth of El Dorado that prompted, as Garcia Marquez suggested, the first invaders to tear the land up subsequently ended in a myth of usurpation. Like Columbus’ “fabulous plants”, “mythical animals” and “beings with supernatural power” (qtd. in Palencia Roth “Intertextualities” 42) which improvised a tantalizing myth of the New World, the El Dorado myth came out as a psycho-geographical extension to the invaders’ dream of possession and the natives’ anxiety of dispossession over everything the myth signified.

The myth, crystallized in the similitude of orientalism, suffered a serious deflation in the heat of colonial cauldron resulting in disenchantment as always was the case in all colonial contact zones. To put it reversely, the demythification of El Dorado began with the rise of postcolonial awareness of accompanying hunger and disillusionment. Historically the passage to postcolonialism yielded a politically rift-ridden, economically emaciated, and socially volatile Colombia where the ‘magic’ of El Dorado persisted in fiction to compensate a stark reality better known as ‘the Colombian reality’. With the colonial El Dorado gone, there stayed back only the relics of El Dorado: an exhausted illusion of the past resources, wastages of revolutions and euphoria of independence deflated by violence and hunger.

**Violence: An Updated Colonial Legacy**

It might be an irony that the people who won independence through the barrels of guns should inherit a legacy of violence, and that they should learn to live peacefully with violence. In *Living to Tell the Tale* Garcia Marquez re-presents this everyday truth; “Tension”, in his country’s context, is “another kind of daily bread” (229). This is not the fictional reality but the glaring reality of Colombia where violence in the postcolonial years attained an institutional status. The drama of unrelenting violence and the prose of hunger, *La Violencia* and *La Hambre* jeopardized the postcolonial dreams of Colombia. The sixty-year old civil war of 1840, the War of a Thousand Days 1899-1903, the “bogootazo” or Gaitan killing in 1948, the wild growth of indigenous dictators, and their repression, oppression and killings took the toll of millions of Colombians. In Garcia Marquez’s words, they were never allowed to have “a moment of rest” from violence or “a moment of serenity”. The tragedy is not Colombia’s alone, it is the tragedy of all Latin American nations:

In the meantime, twenty million Latin American children died before the age of one – more than have been born in Europe since 1970. Those missing because of repression number nearly one hundred and twenty thousand... Numerous women arrested while pregnant have given birth in Argentine prisons, yet nobody knows the whereabouts and identity of their children... nearly two hundred thousand men and women have died throughout the continent, and one hundred thousand have lost their lives in three small and
ill-fated countries of Central America: Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. (“Nobel Lecture” 88)

The intensity of the nightmare can hardly be measured with figures; still figures suggest the tales not yet told. Against this backdrop of demythified postcoloniality, Colombia had its due share of nightmarish violence. Most of the works of Garcia Marquez grow out of this hotbed of violence and independence mistaken for postcoloniality.

Published in 1958, No One Writes to the Colonel, like its predecessor Leaf Storm (1955) remaps the old territory of violence and its constituent maladies – all placed in postcolonial time and space. It is the matrix of violence that has given rise to other determinants e.g. hunger that again has foiled the dreams and sacrifices of those who brought the semblance of postcoloniality. Vargas Llosa referred to this implicit matrix of violence as catalyst to the explicit narrative of hunger and disappointment. Rene Prieto agrees with Llosa: “The Violencia which tore through Colombia starting in 1948 is suggested, implied, alluded to throughout” (“Communication” 42). Though No One Writes to the Colonel is a novel of penury and hunger, it is the political philosophy of violence which, to a large extent, forms the premise of hunger in a cause and effect sequence. The novel begins with the hint of civil war: “For nearly sixty years – since the end of the last civil war – the colonel had done nothing else but wait” (1). The sterile period of hopeless waiting began with the referred civil war. It is suffixed by continual ruptures of violence, repression and militarism, and continuous gliding into the ridges of abject poverty. The decaying Colombian town Macondo serves as the mini stage of this historical shift of emphasis. The colonel, Macondo’s signpost of past bravery and present ignominy is its archetypal citizen who has gone through the wars, seen much of its fire, and been now left as a leftover of history. Through him the silhouette of the evil hours is drawn, and the degenerative forces are commented upon. Within the purview of the text as well as within that of the space referred to, unnatural death has become so natural that the colonel has not known natural death for long years: “It’s the first death from natural causes which we’ve had in many years” (5). It is not death but the naturalness of death that has taken leave of Macondo. Though violence is a prerogative of colonialism, institutionalization of violence is not always a postcolonial syndrome. But this syndrome has been dangerously active in postcolonial Colombia and other Latin American countries. For factors within and beyond the national borders, the legacy of revolutionary wars has ended up in militarization of the laws and the rule. Sabas, the colonel’s friend bitterly refers to this: “I always forget that we are under martial law” (8). Being under martial law, and that too for regimes on end is not the kind of fate deserved by the colonel and his compatriots.

The fabric of violence and persecution is interwoven in such a way that its foreshadowing is given to regulate the heart-throb of Macondo and its people. When the poor musician dies, his funeral procession is re-directed by the mayor disallowing it to “pass in front of the police barracks” (08). The ground for such a prohibition is strongly colonial in texture and symptomatic of military arrogance. It is violence that has made the colonel and his wife literally orphan: “we are the orphan of our son” (10). Their only son Augustin was shot dead by police for distributing clandestine
literature (10). The father has had the same tragedy, only with the difference that he escapes the catastrophe narrowly:

The colonel felt the dry snap, articulate and cold, of a rifle being cocked behind his back… And then he saw, close up, for the first time in his life, the man who had shot his son. The man was directly in front of him, with his rifle barrel aimed at the colonel’s belly. (57)

An inch away from the corridor of death, the colonel visualizes the state-sponsored assassin of a police whose bullet is as indemnified as his gung-ho verdict. The intermittent references to midnight curfew and its infiltration into private life serve as the hangover of violence and repression. The curfew tolls when the colonel finishes scanning the newspapers for news of veteran pension (23). The curfew tolls again when the town sinks in deluge, more locally, when a leak begins somewhere in the colonel’s house (29). The curfew tolls finally when the chilly night air gets laden with the anguished asthmatic breathing of the colonel’s wife (64). The fabric of private life is thus re-adjusted with the texture of the state-run measures aimed at curbing civil discontent and disobedience. The sample cases of mayoral interference, trigger-happy policing and routine curfew stretched over the length of the novel produce an effect of ironical rebuff to the postcolonial aspirations of Colombia via Macondo.

The matrix of violence is seen to operate here in a cause-effect sequence; the harsher the repressive measures are, the subtler are the ways of disobedience. Newspapers run under the sword of Democles; censorship allows only the half-truth, the tampered one, leaving the other half closed for the readership. This has given rise to clandestine literature – a secret circulation of what has been censored. These are the papers that contain the censored items, as the colonel’s doctor friend puts it: “That’s what the newspapers didn’t print yesterday” (16). Except the beneficiaries of independence, almost all the characters – the colonel, doctor, Augustin’s friends are involved in it. Garcia Marquez, in the narrator’s role, postulates here the supplementary ills of prolonged militarism viz. emergence of underground press, insurgency, counter-insurgency and escalation of civil war: “The colonel had assumed as much. It was a summary of events in the country, mimeographed for clandestine circulation. Revelations about the state of armed resistance in the interior of the country” (16). Caught between the distant uproar of “armed resistance” and the local reality of a police state, the anaemic Macondo gets transformed into a mini Latin America in *No One Writes to the Colonel*. This is how the novel, Mario Vargas Llosa observes, embodies a “dry, harsh, asphyxiating reality” – “the understated daily horror of life in America” (“Amadis” 57).

**Matrix of Hunger: When Stones Are Put to Boil**

*No one Writes to the Colonel* is an epic of demystified postcolonial hunger – the hunger that eats up the bonemarrow of independence. An important shift can be observed in Garcia Marquez’s treatment of thematics from *Leaf Storm* to *No one Writes to the Colonel*. The focus is transferred from traditional aristocracy, central in *Leaf Storm*, to the dialectical positioning of the nauveau-rich bourgeoisie against the
lumpen proletariat in *No one Writes to the Colonel*. A new matrix emerges besides violence: it is the matrix of hunger or in other words, the matrix of money or absence of money. Mario Vargas Llosa puts it in flat terms of peso:

> Here the monetary unit is peso and everything in life is referred to money, everything is measured and conditioned by money: Don Sabas’ situation, the colonel’s drama, his wife’s anxieties. Here we know what things “cost”: a rooster can cost 900 pesos, a pair of shoes 13 pesos, a watch 40 pesos. Social hierarchies, happiness and unhappiness, things are valued in monetary terms: this did not happen in *Leaf Storm*. (qtd. in Gutierrez Mouat 19)

What Vargas Llosa overlooks is the distance between peso of illusion and peso of reality – the dispossession and possession of peso that makes all the difference, and that promotes the hierarchial gap between the petitbourgeoise and the proletariat. As the narrative unfolds, the figure 900 proves only hypothetical and tentatively dysfunctional, the reason being, the rooster never gets sold at 900 pesos nor does the watch at 40 pesos except that the figures prolong the colonel’s illusion and his wife’s exasperation. Characteristically enough, Garcia Marquez employs here the socialist matrix of hunger to measure the depth of the colonel couple’s penury and patience compounded by the domestic and political economy of Macondo in a postindependence conundrum.

**Poverty: A Materialistic Autopsy**

The novel begins with a grim snapshot of poverty. One October morning the colonel opens the coffee can to find “only one little spoonful left”. He removes the pot from the fire, pours half the water – the amount meant for his own coffee – on to the earthen floor, and then scrapes “the inside of the can with a knife until the last scrapings of the ground coffee, mixed with bits of rust” (1) falls into the pot. When his wife is given the cup, she asks about his own, and it follows a sweet lie: “I’ve had mine. There was still a big spoonful left” (1). The morning ritual of coffee thus sets the matrix of poverty in operation in the novel.

The seventy-five year old war veteran colonel lives with his ailing wife in a house that has already been mortgaged. The whitewash of the worn-out walls is flaking off; water leaks through its palm-thatched roof when it rains. The colonel earns nothing. He has been waiting for war pension for the last fifteen years but it never comes (23). Poverty has been an old companion to the family but it has settled rather menacingly after the death of their son Augustin nine months ago. To feed the three – the couple and the rooster – they have to sell away Augustin’s sewing machine. Their smallest savings have long been exhausted. Nothing valuable is left in the household that can be sold. Nobody would buy the clock or the picture. The only thing that remains to be sold is the rooster, but the couple is divided as to whether Augustin’s fighting cock should be sold or fed as the third hungry mouth. Against this background of proletarian domestic economy Garcia Marquez furnishes more pungent details to draw a disappointing vision of postcoloniality.
The few articles of everyday use that they still possess have gathered similar subaltern dust. The umbrella eaten away by the moths looks like “circus clown’s umbrella”. The colonel bitterly remarks: “The only thing it’s good for now is to count the stars” (4). The pair of shoes the colonel uses are so dog-eared that his wife advises him to throw them away: “Those shoes are ready to throw out.” The colonel feels desolate: “They look like shoes of an orphan. Every time I put them on I feel like a fugitive from an asylum” (10). The remaining pair, the patent-leather ones, are “monstrosities” of “forty years old”. The comb the colonel’s wife uses has some teeth missing. The colonel does his shaving without a mirror, just feeling the touch of skin. The detachable collar of his shirt is irremediably torn, and so, unfit for a tie. As they have no money to buy new clothes, the colonel’s wife makes cyclic use of worn-out clothing and performs “eternal miracle of creating an apparel out of nothing” (18). In fact she tailors a shirt of “three different colors of materials except for the collar and the cuffs” for her husband knowing perfectly well that it would give him a carnivalesque appearance. The physiology of poverty thus drawn serves as a preliminary to the inner drama – the psychology of hunger, submission and defiance epitomized in the struggle of the trio – two subhumans and an animal “pal”.

**Poverty: From Physiology to Psychology**

The novel is overtly built on the physiology of poverty, then expanded beyond the digestive tract of “fungus and lilies” to psycho-behavioural patterns of the characters – patterns induced and defined by poverty and politics. The passage from physiology to psychology of poverty is asterisked by some animate and inanimate determinants, for example, sewing machine, anticlock, non-saleable picture, coffee, corns, carnivalesque dress, letter of pension, rooster etc. As signposts of subaltern life, these objects overreach their commodity value and percolate down through the biological crevices of everyday existence.

The colonel’s sarcasm “Life is the best thing that’s ever been invented” (42) presumably connotes a kind of life that cannot possibly be further stretched: miserable and unbearable. His earlier gimmick “Nobody dies in three months” (33) can be viewed as a forced mockery of biological truth – a lullaby to postpone hunger and the accompanying morbidity. He unconvincingly tries to share with his wife a dream he himself half-believes: beyond the test span of three months there lies the golden time. Life driven from pillar to post – from nine-month-long post-Augustin impoverishment to the distant prospect of hypothetical solvency to be brought by the ever illusive pension and the rooster (if it wins at all) is indeed not the promised life to a veteran’s family. Both the colonel and his wife know well that the ritual of body – its paraphernalia of needs has started parading over their souls. Poverty has already taken its toll over dignity; mortgage of house, debt to the doctor and purchase on credit from grocers have brought them down to the level of beggars. A paradigmatic study of the aforesaid determinants would show how the lack of physiological input has gone to produce psychological output of the couple.

Of the determinants, the rooster has been developed in the novel as a catalyst of poverty besides the other roles assigned to it. To the colonel, it is a legacy left by Augustin, and so, to be taken care of. To his wife, it is an “ugly rooster” that looks
like a freak; “his head is too tiny for his feet” (9). The couple cannot feed themselves, let alone the rooster. Still the colonel is determined to keep it, and his wife to get rid of it. He considers it “the best in the district” and “worth about fifty pesos” (8), and she considers it an “expensive illusion” with the premonition that “when the corn is gone we’ll have to feed him on our own livers” (10). Feeding it on their own livers has airs more of a suppressed psychological agony than of a biological truth. The proceeds of Augustin’s sewing machine subsist them for nine months. During this long stretch of time they have “spent that money penny by penny, parceling it out between their needs and the rooster’s” (18). Now in October, the time the narrative begins, they are left with “only two twenty-cent pieces and a ten-cent piece”. The rooster, a symbol of resistance and fight for the colonel and Augustin’s friends, is still a third mouth to feed. The colonel’s wife spends the last dregs of the cents on the rooster’s corn. She tells her husband in a mood of resignation: “Buy the corn. God knows how we’ll manage.” A time comes when they glide further into the abyss of pennilessness where the distinction between the humans and the animal becomes a virtual non-entity. With no other alternative left open, the couple shares the corn given to the rooster by Augustin’s cock-loving friends. When the corn mash is served, the colonel wants to know: “Where’d it come from?”, the woman answers: “From the rooster.” Though sympathetic to her husband’s plea, she can neither afford nor accept the extra burden of an ominous bird that feeds on their food and peace of mind. She even considers it a sin: “It’s sin to take the food out of our mouths to give it to a rooster” (33). It is therefore evident that “food” / fodder, thus linked with “sin”, gets extended to other premises beyond physiology – premises of ethics, religion and psychology.

With the colonel visibly doing nothing to scrape a living, the saleable items all sold out, and the few remaining cents all spent, the colonel’s wife takes the most painful decision of her life to ask for a loan from Father Angel on their wedding rings. Father blatantly refuses saying: “it’s a sin to barter with sacred things” (45). It is not that the woman is unaware of it but circumstances have forced her to think of such a heartless sale. The anguish, pain and helplessness incorporated in it can only be understood in terms of subaltern psychology of poverty. This is a desperate culmination of her older anguish: “we’re rotting alive” (4).

The eternal conflict between dignity and poverty tends to manifest in the couple. The colonel may not have the prosperity of the class of Sabas but he enjoys the social dignity of a war veteran. Still the dignity is cowered every moment in the face of Sabas’s affluence or in the act of borrowing. The colonel feels small in presence of wealthy Sabas; the latter’s window offers an altogether different view of rain (38); his coffee sweetener tablets impregnate the colonel’s saliva with a sad sweetness (39); his three-hour-wait for Sabas fetches only a double “I’ll be right back” (48-9) but no attention. He finds it demeaning to go on borrowing: “He had to grit his teeth many times to ask for credit in the neighborhood stores” (31) or as he says: “I’m tired of going around asking favors” (29). His every step towards mitigating hunger is met with a compromise with his innate pride and dignity. His pragmatic wife snipes at his false notion of dignity: “You’re dying of hunger. You should realize that you can’t eat dignity” (46). But ironically she herself suffers from an equal sense
of dignity and is equally apprehensive of her neighbours’ knowledge of their poverty:

‘So now everyone knows we’re starving.’
‘I’m tired,’ the woman said, ‘Men don’t understand problems of the household. Several times I’ve had to put stones on to boil so the neighbors wouldn’t know that we often go for many days without putting on the pot.’

The new paradigm of poverty – stones on to boil is not in the least a mimic of culinary art; it is a middle class attempt to conceal proletarian hunger, more so, to salvage the left-over dignity perforated by disgraces. While doing so the colonel’s wife tries to deceive not only her neighbours but also her own self. This exposes a psychology at the crossroads of desperation and helplessness arisen out of her / their incapacity for accepting the indignity of poverty and lack of initiative to win over it. Though she talks of being “fed up with resignation and dignity” and vows “to give up affectation and pretense” (46), the text provides little evidence beyond ad hoc arrangements to postpone hunger. Nor does it provide any foreseeable reason to hope against hope in the years they are yet to live out. The situation at hand seems to be compounded by their old age, loss of Augustin, illusion of pension and lastly, the liability of a rooster. Though the colonel informs of his being hired in a clarinet factory, it seems another piece of mockery by the seventy-five-year-old old man. Even before the death of Augustin, for forty years they have been living in privation; Augustin’s death has only exacerbated it. The illusion of pension has been transformed not only into a routine dream but also an ethereal asset to mortgage and to borrow on. The rooster, despite its synonymity with Macondo’s hope and defiance, happens to increase a burden too heavy for his old shoulder to carry. To Sabas, this is pure “madness” and “idiotic stubbornness” (40-1). So in the face of all rhetorical defiance of hunger, hunger remains instrumental in synthesizing the couple’s physiology and psychology.

**Dialectic of Wealth and Poverty: The Species of Sabas and the Colonel**

“Man is what he eats”: formulated Hegelian disciple Ludwig Feuerbach. Marx contradicted it saying: “Or doesn’t eat” (Woodfin and Zarate 7). *No One Writes to the Colonel* focuses on a decaying postcolonial society with two distinct sets of people: who eat, and who cannot afford to eat. Both from the viewpoints of Hegelian “ideas” and Marxist “matter”, the entire society seems to be divided and placed antithetically: Sabas typifying the burgeoning petit-bourgeoise and the colonel the local gentry dwindling away to proletarian status. They are dichotomous not only in terms of “matter” or money but also in terms of “ideas”.

In an otherwise poverty-stricken Macondo Sabas is a metonym for affluence. His appearance has been carved out to befit his stature: “A small man, corpulent, but with flaccid flesh, he had the sadness of a toad in his eyes” (38). Short in height, fat in diameter and fragile in skin, Sabas has a rare proximity to a toad with suggestion of melancholia and ugliness. He wears a ring with a black stone next to his wedding band – the band that tied him to an imbecile and neurotic wife. The colonel’s wife
gives a more accurate picture of Sabas and his rise to the present status: “There is my friend Sabas with a two-story house that isn’t big enough to keep all his money in, a man who came to this town selling medicines with a snake curled round his neck” (46). Virtually a street-man, a quack-like medicine man, Sabas has climbed up the ladder of prosperity with no magic lamp except that of corrupt liaison with the new rulers, particularly the mayor. His access to surplus money is the outcome of a strategic alliance with the forces of corruption rampant in most postcolonial space. The doctor makes a caustic reference to “his (Sabas’s) infamous patriot pact with the mayor” which the credulous mayor believes to have been done to save his skin. The doctor adds: “And that’s how he could buy the property of his fellow-partisans whom the mayor kicked out at half their price” (55). He tells the disbelieving colonel: “Don’t be so naive. Sabas is much more interested in money than in his own skin” (55). To be interested in money is not a crime but if the means to amass it is the usurpation of others, then it is surely a crime. Sabas suffers from no moral scruple to cheat his friend the colonel by raising the expectation of the couple as regards the price of the rooster which he declares as high as nine hundred pesos. The colonel’s wife, boarded on the tentative sale, mentally organizes “the budget for the next three years without their Friday agony” (51). But when Sabas is offered to buy it, he not only reduces the price but also thinks of making money out of a re-sale: “I have a customer who might give you four hundred pesos” (54). The symbolic town that has given him plenty of money to roll on, plenty to staff his safe full, and build a two-storied magnificent building is a town “rotten” to him: “This town stinks” (38). What stinks is not the town but Sabas himself. He belongs to the species of the Latin American leaders who left their revolutionary legacy to enter into an entente with the centre of power first to escape persecution, then to have access to wealth. The text corroborates the shift: “It was Sabas, the godfather of his dead son, the only leader of the party who had escaped political persecution and had continued to live in town” (7). His rise to power and wealth speaks of a stinking socio-political reality. He is not alone to reap the fruits of revolutions in terms of peso; he has a bandwagon of compatriots who promise a heaven at the time of election and finds it convenient to forget when it is over. These are the people who have done their duty “by making a thousand pesos a month in the Senate for twenty years” (46) at the cost of those who have grown poorer and penniless in the corresponding time. Against the central presence of the senators, the mayor and Sabas, the peripheral presence of the colonel couple, “Augustin’s companions – workers from the tailor shop”, the dead musician, the women “in the poor neighborhood” (8), “the whole town – the lower class people” (62) confirms the dialectic of wealth and poverty formulated throughout the novel. The dialectic is based on “the same story as always”, as the colonel’s wife sums up, “we put up with hunger so others can eat. It’s the same story for forty years” (67). For forty or eighty, the archetypal Macondo reaches no economic synthesis beyond the widening premises of thesis and antithesis. If it ever reaches anywhere, it is a highly abortive synthesis expressed in the colonel’s monosyllabic “shit”:

‘There are still forty-four days left to begin to think about that,’ the colonel said.
The woman lost her patience.
‘And meanwhile what do we eat?’ she asked, and seized the colonel by the collar of his flannel night shirt. She shook him hard.
It had taken the colonel seventy-five years – the seventy-five years of his life, minute by minute – to reach the moment. He felt pure, explicit, invincible at the moment when he replied: ‘Shit.’ (69)

This desperate departure from the colonel’s life-long cultivated savoir-faire is the admission that one who stinks is not necessarily the one who eats shit.
Works Cited


Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian novelist who became one of the giants in the history of literature, died on Thursday at his home in Mexico City. He was 87. His works were rooted in a mythical Latin American landscape of his own creation, yet his appeal was so universal that his books were translated into dozens of languages and sold by the millions. While working on that book he took time off in 1957 to complete another short novel, "No One Writes to the Colonel," about an impoverished retired army officer, not unlike the author's grandfather, who waits endlessly for a letter replying to his requests for a military pension. It was published to acclaim four years later. ("In Evil Hour" was also published in the early 1960s.)