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STRUCTURES OF POWER AND RESISTANCE IN MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S
CONVERSATION IN THE CATHEDRAL

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ABSTRACT

In this research paper Mario Vargas Llosa has depicted authoritarianism in Latin America. He is a master of modernist narrating technique and a consummate story teller. His novels show skepticism towards absolutes, traditional authority and power of author which invokes Lyotard's incredulity of meta-fiction is politically informed and offers a postcolonial critique. *Conversation in the Cathedral* contains multiple perspectives and stories which creates a circular narrative. Llosa uses postmodernist technique to explain the postcolonial position. The novel offers a powerful indictment of miserable social reality of Peru.

Key words: Postmodernism, Postcolonialism



Mario Vargas Llosa has been writing on politics since the early 1960s. Early in his career, Llosa believed that true socialism might be a possibility in Latin America, but gradually, he came to the conclusion that the Cuban model would not guarantee intellectual freedom. He was attracted towards Jean Paul Sartre's ideas of commitment. When he leaned away from leftist ideology, Albert Camus became his ethical model. Camus has rejected totalitarianism as a social system where human beings become an instrument of state power. He turned away from Sartre's view that creative writers play a key role in transformation of society. Instead, he felt that literary freedom can be affront to oppressive or totalitarian regimes. He believes that literature is a form of protest against the world as we find it.

The political leadership of Latin America is as diverse as its culture. The region has seen many populist, socialist, capitalist, dictatorial and military regimes. The region has suffered because of unequal distribution of resources among nations, classes and races. According to Teresa A. Meade: "A key feature

of post-colonial life that exemplified the nature of class relationships in Latin America was the concentration of wealth in few hands..." (82). Talking about the post-independence reality of this region Meade writes: "Latin American nationalism and particular definition of national identity varied over time and place, rested on competing notions of power, and depended on the rights accorded to or taken by Indians, black mestizos and mixed-race people" (86). Colonialism has left Latin America economically, politically and culturally devastated. The scenario didn't change much even after independence. It brought many problems related to the class, ethnicity, gender and racial issues to the forefront. A postcolonial novel deals with the historical, material and actual living conditions of a newly independent nation. A politically informed fiction is a critique of nation-state. Llosa in his fiction has tried to explore diverse issues of Latin American nations from violence to political corruption and its ever present neighbour USA. Like a postmodernist fiction, in his works he uses detective fiction, metafiction, temporal distortion, fictional history

mixed together with real, contemporary and historical figures. Postmodern critical theory, as Lindolf and Taylor put it, "politicises social problems by situating them in historical and cultural contexts, to implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analysing data and to relativise their finding" (52). According to Lois Parkinson Zamora:

"Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Llosa's novels have linked their novelistic and journalistic writings to the political responsibility of the intellectual in Latin America. They argue that journalism and fiction may be less clearly separated in Latin America than elsewhere and imply that the novel like newspaper must address political and social issues if it is to serve as an instrument of knowledge and hence as an instrument of social change" (42).

In *Conversation in the Cathedral*, Llosa depicts how new elites exploit the nation, masses and nationalism becomes a word for preserving the power and privileges of the elites. Here, Llosa engages the strategies of realistic narration and yet challenges the assumptions of realism. In this sense, it is situated between the narrative realism and magical realism. Llosa bases his fiction on the recorded histories of nations and individuals, though not always explicitly. Since the meaning has become unstable due to changes in social structures, postmodernist fiction centres on local manifestation rather than big narratives. Llosa himself assumes that the concept of history must itself be located historically. The hero Santiago Zavala, is partly autobiographical character. He leaves the communist Cahuide Party after participating in the workers strike at San Marcos University. He is arrested and released because of a deal struck between his wealthy and capitalist father Don Fermin and Cayo Bermudez, Odria's shadowy secret police chief. Through Zavalita's character Llosa has expressed doubts about the communist regimes. According to Neil Larsen:

Zavalita cannot quite distinguish whether it was his own political idealism or his infatuation with Aida, a fellow cell member that led to his participation. He does not find it easy as Llosa to write off the experience as youthful folly.....Zavalita

wonders whether his sudden abandonment of the revolutionary ideals embodied in Cahuide and his failure to declare love for Aida are not the precise moment when he himself 'se jodio' the moment of his own personal failure. (148)

The novel looks into the nature of evil and its relation with power which corrupts absolutely. According to Sara Castro Klaren the discourse of the novel is centered on the question and dynamics of power. Being a political novel, it talks about social and political change in Latin America. As the title of the novel suggests, the narrative is based on the conversation between Santiago and Ambrosia. Besides this, there are nineteen conversations which are superimposed on each other. It creates a montage like effect. As Sara Castro Klaren puts it: "Vargas Llosa gave the term Chinese box which means inside the first large box are the other boxes that duplicate and repeat the same design of the outer frame. But here there is great deal of diversity and variation in the conversations. In the novel, the author through varied conversations has tried to portray the myriad complexities and feel of Peru's social and racial class system caught in the process of decomposition" (95-98). Fragmentation and non-linear narrative is used here by Llosa for the sake of irony. The term "historiographic metafiction" coined by Linda Hutcheon refers to the works which fictionalise actual historical events or figures, applies on *Conversation in the Cathedral* also.

The meaning of truth plays a dominant thematic role in the novel. Santiago cannot free himself from his search for truth and ultimately he pays for the truth which he cannot deny because it will be another form of self-destruction. The truth is either forgotten or circulates in the social circles in the form of rumours. This ephemeral script of spoken languages has been inscribed into the text by Llosa. In totalitarian regimes, truth is not printed in the newspaper. Everyone knows about it, but officially it is denied. Through this novel, Llosa has tried to bring out the consequences of the denial of truth. It produces only failures like Santiago.

The novel comprises of the conversation between Santiago, a journalist and a dog-catcher and executioner Ambrosio, who is a pardo.

Ambrosio is the former chauffeur of Santiago's father Don Fermin. They sit and talk to each other in a pub called La Catedral. On the surface level, Santiago wants to know about La Musa's murder. But at the deeper level he wants to know how his and Peru's life disintegrated. Santiago is a son of a rich family. He represents the elite of society. It is expected of him to enter a profession and follow the values and privileges of his family and class. But he rebels against his class and joins the ranks of 'cholos' by marrying a lower class, non-white girl. His mother Dona Zoila believed in class distinctions. So, Santiago is socially excluded after his marriage with a 'Cholita'.

Santiago is a rebel from the beginning. He enters San Marcos University rather than a prestigious Catholic University and becomes a member of Cahuideo group. This group has read Marx and other socialist thinkers. They deeply feel that only a Marxist revolution will enable Peru to become a developed and just society. Santiago is an activist, but he has no clear convictions and acts on the advice of a female comrade and friend Aida, whom he loves. He is in fact an aesthetic dilettante. Aida and Jacob, mock his ideas of a pure revolution dedicated to books and museums. They feel that he will never cease to be a bourgeois. The group prepares to join a student-worker rebellion against the dictatorial regime of Odria. Even though he is reluctantly given a minor role in the final uprising, he is arrested. The university is overtaken by police and proclaimed as a centre of anti-government activities. All the doubtful elements thought of as Apristas are either arrested or expelled and the university is shut down.

The university reflected the country, Jacobo said, twenty years ago those professors were probably progressives and readers, then because they had to work at other things and because of the environment they became mediocre and bourgeois... It was the student's fault too, Aida said... But if the university was a reflection of the country San Marcos would never be in good shape as long as Peru was so badly off, Santiago said, and Aida if what was wanted was to cure the disease at its roots there shouldn't be any talk of

university reform but of revolution. But they were students and their field of action was university, Jacobo said, by working for reform they would be working for the revolution you had to go through stages and not be pessimistic. (Llosa 92)

Thematically, the novel explores how individuals, communities and society can be undermined by the corrosive effects of corruption. According to David Gallagher, it offers a damning picture of a nation in which every individual is compromised or corrupted in one way or another (qtd in Kristal 37). The complex narrative structure of the novel mixes conversations and events on the same page which are taking place simultaneously in different places and in different time zones. Santiago is shattered on discovering his father as a gay called 'Gold Ball' in criminal circle. He was shocked to know that Ambrosio, who was Don Fermin's chauffeur, was also his lover. Ambrosio assassinated Hortensia, the ex-keep of Cayo Bermudez. She was a prostitute and also a drug addict. She had threatened to reveal that Ambrosio's boss, Don Fermin, was a homosexual.

Kristal writes: "Llosa here shows the disproportion between the public respectability of his protagonists and the sordid realities they endure or the brutality and abuse to which they subject their victims" (38). In the end the novel makes it clear that honesty and social success are totally incompatible in this society. The corrupt social system kills the desires or hopes of any individual even if they are the most powerful or treacherous. Santiago chooses failure rather than success. He leaves his studies and starts working in a newspaper. According to Jean Franco, *Conversation* offers the portrait, "of a society that neutralises rebellion and turns young people into either failures or conformists." He further adds: "The novel lacks a dialectical process, which would offer a way out. The regime and the powerful are constantly threatened by treachery and blackmail, but the revolution never breaks out. The stability of the dominant class is invariably guaranteed, and the self-realisation of individual losses all meaning in such a thoroughly corrupt environment" (qtd in Kristal 42). Santiago is an individual who does not know the solution to the

problems that plague his corrupt country and laments, "if everybody set himself to being intelligent and having his doubt, Peru would go on being screwed up forever" (Llosa 139). In the novel, the destiny of nation and myriad characters is conjoined. Santiago ponders over the destruction of Peru.

Seen from the Marxist, it is not the individual in power, but the capitalist system that accounts for the corruption in society. The novel covers the period in Latin American history from Dictator Manuel Odría's regime to the first presidential election of Fernando Belaunde Terry. It also touches upon the migration of the indigenous people from rural areas to Peru's major cities. This gave rise to the upper middle class and people like Don Fermin. The minorities were repressed, the judges brow-beaten and the politicians threatened. The government conducted fake elections. The totalitarian regimes in Latin America fed their countries with fake news and distorted facts. In Peru and other South American countries, the dictators won elections with absolute majority. Don Fermin is shown to be actively involved in legitimising the dictatorship through compromised elections. The novel unmasks any pretence of decency of Peruvian society. Even the title intimates that the conversation takes place not in the cathedral but in a bar; ironically named as La Catedral. The novel gives an insight into the life of the descendants of black slaves, the Indian people and their Spanish masters in the Southern Peruvian areas of Chíncha and Ica.

Amalia, a migrant from the highlands to Lima, is an integral part of the social structure of the novel. Amalia and Ambrosia offer an objective view of the social life. They move in between the different social circles of the society. They give an objective view of their master's lives. While Amalia belonged to high Andes, Ambrosio is a mulatto boy from Chíncha. He is a man of Indian and African descent, 'a pardo'. Ambrosio remains socially and economically backward. He has to face the same lot as his parents, neighbours and the other people of his class have suffered. Cayo Bermudez who belongs to Chíncha, is also a dark man of humble origin. He and Ambrosia played together in childhood. Because

of his crookedness, Bermudez becomes the chief of secret police of Odría's administration.

Both Ambrosia and Amalia provide an insight into the life of the lower classes. Ambrosia serves as chauffeur to the two most powerful and corrupt men in Lima, Don Fermin and Cayo Bermudez. His proximity provides him an insight into their domestic and public life. Although he is a mute spectator, yet he is aware of his masters' frustration, pain and solitude. Though humble and oppressed, he is loyal to his masters. He also becomes Don Fermin's homosexual lover. He is a passive figure whose memory is not motivated by an intelligent consciousness. Using Ambrosio's memory, Santiago acts as a detective to find out the riddle's solution. Vargas Llosa says: "It was a dictatorship that robbed his generation for there were no heroes and no martyrs, it produced only failures" (qtd in Klaren 98). Jose Miguel Oviedo believes:

The writing of an openly political novel posed a special challenge to Vargas Llosa's own criteria of a novelistic objectivity. Llosa has to admit to the inevitable confrontation of his fictional elaboration with real and public models which were not confined to a single institution, nor were they marginal; instead they were widely known and easily identifiable to the national public. (qtd in Klaren 98)

The multiple stories told in the novel create a circular narrative. Each segment of each story provides new information. The juxtaposition of stories occurring at different points in the past creates a contrapuntal effect in plot. But out of chaos of voices and fragments of scenes emerges a schematic and direct line from Santiago's household to La Musa's murder. Santiago is desperate to know why Ambrosio became his father's lover. On the contrary Ambrosio is unable to understand that why Santiago rejected his father. As Kristal puts it:

With this novel, Llosa reconciled the most daring literary techniques of Joyce and Faulkner (the crossing of temporal and spatial planes, the use of indirect speech and interior monologue) with expressions of popular culture (films, music, sensationalist journalism) to explore an indecent social world. (43)

Thus Llosa has used postmodernist techniques to explore postcolonial situation. It is a powerful indictment of miserable social reality of Peru whose upper classes' comfortable lives are the cause of exploitation of lower classes. According to Klaren: "Because the novel brings its major character, Santiago Zavala, to the most abject level of depression, disenchantment and cynicism, some critics have seen it as a culmination of modernist ideology"(78). Santiago cannot free himself, for a moment, from his search for truth. His consciousness bears the entire weight of the truth. He pays with his life. But this truth can only be repressed and suppressed. Limbo is the only antidote. "The truth becomes one more piece in the archives of what Sartre has called bad faith, because this truth even though it was the true object of Santiago's quests turns out to be unbearable"(Klaren 104). This is a society where race separates, politics divides, kinship estranges, money distances, social position isolates. Llosa strikes at the heart of identity of Latin America which has been ordained by the colonial masters and which still informs the society. As Dr. Manmohan Singh writes in his article 'Discourse of Postmodernism: Complicity or Resistance': "Now in postmodern context, modern nation-state is in a crisis especially after having ceded a part of its authority to transnational bodies or supranational structures. The Third World nationalism after having been an emancipatory force during colonial struggle has degenerated in a hegemonic idea/state, which seeks to homogenize or assimilate the difference" (220).

Postcolonialism examines the nature of the postcolonial state where many of the corrupt practices and problems of the former European masters have persisted. It appropriates, modifies and generates many forms of narratives, rhetoric by which critique of empire and imperialism be made. It is radical and subversive as it seeks to challenge the new nation. History is a central theme in postcolonial writing. Nayyar opines: "Writers from former colonies often find the need to negotiate, understand and recover from their traumatic pasts. This negotiation is often an attempt to achieve an identity different from the one imposed on them by

the colonizer" (52). A central mode of retrieving the past in postcolonial literatures is through reconstruction of cultural and national histories. The multiple selves and perspectives, in the novel, help the writer in not legitimising any view. There is no ultimate position offered by the author. History is not progressive but repetitive as it is not having linear narrative. The subject is indeterminate, fragmented and against unified subjectivity and decentered. The claim of Marxist, that man is the subject of historical process is repudiated as Llosa has shown history to be cyclical. Moreover there is total aimlessness in the attitude of Santiago. He is not a unified or coherent or ideological subject. He has become a mere object of historical process, an effect of impersonal structures, media and discourse. But this doesn't mean that the novelist has abandoned the modernist utopian longing for liberation. He is not nihilistic in nature like First-world postmodernists; rather he seeks meaning in meaningless world. He doesn't leave emancipatory politics.

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