

**PROSTITUTION AND THE ‘NEW WOMAN’:
REPRESENTATION OF SEXUALLY LIBERATED WOMEN
IN SELECTED FICTIONAL NARRATIVES OF GABRIEL
GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ AND MARIO VARGAS LLOSA**

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CHAPTER-7

CONCLUSION

Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa are two prolific writers of the twentieth-century Latin America whose works have attracted attention of readers worldwide for their literary genius in crafting meticulous plot-lines, use of modernist literary techniques in creating marvellous language and the use of brilliant characters for portraying the socio-cultural scenario of Latin America, previously unknown to the world. Both contemporaries and receivers of the Nobel Prize in literature, their works gained world-wide recognition during the literary ‘Boom’ of the 1960’s, with some marvelous works like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, *Time of the Hero*, *The Green House*, among other significant works. García Márquez and Vargas Llosa wrote at a time of great historical and political upheavals that marked the countries of Latin America. Naturally therefore, historical and political events become the engaging themes for both the writers for their works. Nonetheless, themes pertaining to social, traditional and cultural aspects like ‘machismo’ and ‘marianismo,’ ‘female sexuality,’ ‘gender-relations,’ ‘sexual liberation,’ ‘power’ etc. also juxtapose the political and overtly historical in their works. Both the writers are critics of society who try to unmask the social evils through their writings. Prostitution is one such aspect, generally considered as a social “evil,” that has emerged as a consistent literary theme in many of the works of the two writers, as evident from the discussions in this thesis.

A historical analysis of the institution of prostitution traces its roots to the temple prostitution of Mesopotamia, carried out in and around the temples of the female

goddess Ishtar. As prostitution was carried out in the name of a goddess, women engaging in selling sexual services were considered as “sacred” and had validation from the society. However, with the advent of Christianity, along with its emphasis on female sexual morality and virtues, the image of the prostitute got re-defined and transformed from “sacred” to that of “whores” and harbingers of “immorality” and “sin.” This denigration of the image of prostitutes had adverse effects on the status of women as they began to face marginalization as social outcasts.

The issue of prostitution as source of women’s oppression and marginalization found a significant place in the feminist discourse when issues of female sexuality as the cause of women’s subordination to men found prominence in the feminist debates of the radical feminists during the 1960s. However, disagreements among these women regarding the best ways to fight ‘sexism’ divided them into two factions—the radical-culturalists and the radical-libertarians. When on the one hand, the radical-cultural feminists argue that patriarchal heterosexual activities are harmful for women; on the other, the radical-libertarians justify that women’s sexual liberation rests on women’s power to enjoy any kind of sex that gives pleasure to them. Thus, the radical-libertarian feminists justify women’s choice in embracing prostitution and pornography as a means of achieving sexual pleasure by women in a patriarchal society, as against the view of radical-culturalists who propagate an abolitionist standpoint against such institutions.

What is significant about the discussions on prostitution is the entry of prostitutes themselves in the feminist debate. These prostitutes blamed the feminists for formulating policies based on a second-hand world view on their lives and experiences. Thus, Mario St. James, an ex-prostitute, founded the first prostitutes’ rights organization, *COYOTE*, to give voice to the prostitutes to speak up for their own rights.

These prostitutes maintain that not all of them who work in the ‘sex’ industry are victims of economic exploitation, poverty and rape. Many women voluntarily “choose” to engage in the business. Hence, they shouldn’t be treated in a reductionist way; rather be seen as professionals engaging in a form of “sex work.” The effort of Margo St. James encouraged women to similarly organize to form prostitutes’ rights organizations across the world, for both pro and against prostitution. Hence, the shift in looking at prostitutes not typically as “victims” but as ‘sexually liberated’ created a new image of prostitutes as the “newly sexed” who gave definition and new meanings to the image of the “whore.” Thus, this research traces the concept of the “newly sexed women” to the image of the ‘new women’ of the 1920s known as the ‘flappers’ who dominated the cultural scenario of the United States of America; and relates it to the image of the prostitutes who are treated as ‘sexually liberated’ in the works of the two writers— Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa.

The image of the prostitute as “newly sexed” did not emerge as a dominant one in the literary scenario of Latin America before the 1960s. Though different writers like Eugenio Cambacere, Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera, Federico Gamboa and Romulo Gallegos have handled the concept of prostitutes as “newly sexed” in their works, they have been found falling in the trap of treating prostitutes only as “tragic victims” of a patriarchal society without any scope of empowerment to their characters. However, with García Márquez and Vargas Llosa a major deviation is seen when prostitutes became the consistent theme in their works; not particularly as “victims,” but as ‘sexually liberated’ who can be treated as the ‘newly sexed’ or the ‘new women’ in their society.

An important aspect that this research explores is the image of the “whore” as “sacred” in Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* and Gabriel García Márquez’s *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. The researcher by “constructing” the image of the prostitutes Olga and her co-workers in *Captain Pantoja* and Delgadina in *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* subverts the traditional normative idea of the prostitute as “evil” and re-defines their identity as “sacred” women deserving respect in society. This new way of looking at prostitutes not as women deserving ostracism in society, but as women who have the potential to contribute as much to the well-being of a society as its so-called “respected” members, is seen to be successful in portraying a society where the gender divisions between men and women, and between women and women in particular, seem to diminish, if not be completely eliminated.

The societies of Latin America are highly gendered, whereby both women and men adhere to the strict traditional and cultural gendered roles of ‘machismo’ and ‘marianismo.’ In such a society prostitutes are contrasted as “bad whores” as against the “good wives” of society. However, the three fictional narratives of Gabriel García Márquez *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, “The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother” and “The Woman Who Came at Six O’Clock,” subvert this dichotomy to portray a society where the “good wives” like Ursula and Fernanda in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* become the “slaves” of such a patriarchal tradition; and the “bad whores” like Pilar Ternera and Petra Cotes become the ‘sexually liberated’ women whereby they transgress and liberate themselves from such traditions. Similarly, Eréndira in “Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother” becomes the “new sexed woman” when she refuses to bow down and to

be subservient to both her grandmother and her lover Ulises and breaks free from the “slave”-like life lived under her grandmother and also the traditional married life sanctioned by Christian morality for women. On the other hand, the “queen” in “The Woman Who Came at Six O’Clock” becomes liberated from the patriarchal restrictions on her female sexuality when she rebels against the sexual exploitation of her male client and frees herself from the bondages of a “hypocritical corrupt” society that the male client symbolizes.

In a patriarchal society, restrictions on female sexuality marginalize women to the position of “other” of the male “self.” In this regard female sexual empowerment rests on women’s power to have a decisive say in matters of sex and to demand equal sexual gratifications from their male counterparts. Mario Vargas Llosa’s two novels *The Green House* and *The Bad Girl* portray the prostitute characters Bonifacia, Lalita and Lily as sexually empowered as they seek equal sexual satisfaction from their partners. Moreover, Bonifacia’s proud acceptance of her status as a “whore” which liberates her from the hypocritical morality of her male partners; and Lily’s rejection of any kind of conciliation towards her so-called “exploited” partners, except for the honest and “good-natured” Ricardo Somocurcio, confirms the claim that sexual transgression can bring liberation and empowerment in a male-dominated society.

An important question that the researcher poses in the introductory chapter is whether ‘sexual liberation’ of prostitutes entitles women complete freedom from traditional restrictions on female sexuality. From a feminist understanding of the selected fictional narratives of both the writers it transpires that complete freedom from traditional restrictions is possible in Latin American society so long as the element of “choice” is prevalent among women. Thus, the prostitute characters in the works taken

for study can be justified as emancipated women as they “choose” to either remain in the prostitution business or be completely freed from the “exploitation” and “degradation” that the industry symbolizes.

The other question that the researcher explores in this study is whether normative female behavior and sacrosanct social norms prevent prostitutes from being admitted into a patriarchal society. From a detailed analysis of the fictional narratives taken for study, it is revealed that in a typical Latin American society prostitutes face ostracism based on their sexuality; but a re-construction of the image of the prostitute and a critical re-reading of the texts also lay bare the possibility of treating “whores” as women deserving “respect” in the society. Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa are two socially conscious writers, and their social consciousness of the condition of prostitutes which they have personally experienced—either as spectators or as sexual partners—have resulted in their depicting a society which marginalizes prostitutes as “whores.” However, they have also procreated a fictional world where sexual freedom and sexual empowerment is possible for those women who seek to become agents of their own sexual liberation where they either accept a society where they find sexual fulfillment in remaining within the confines of the society, or break free from such normative ideologies to define and demand freedom on their own terms within the established traditional norms of the society.

In a paper titled “Sacred Prostitution: The Whore and The Holy One,” Elizabeth Cunningham pertinently summarizes the socio-cultural aspect of prostitution as:

Until the holy whore archetype is honoured, there will be a whore stigma.
Women will be divided against each other and themselves, and we will be at

odds with our own human nature. As a practical counterpart to archetypal integration, I'd suggest that we advocate for decriminalization of prostitution. However, women (and men) enter what is called the oldest profession, whether as victims of circumstance or by choice, whether we practice in a manner that we view as sacred or profane (another aspect of the same dichotomy) they do not deserve to be persecuted or prosecuted (4).

This analysis of Cunningham whereby she argues in favour of prostitutes as women deserving equal treatment in society as its “perceived” respected members; and who do not deserve to be persecuted as “whores” or be prosecuted as “criminals,” emphasizes a very relevant aspect of this research where the researcher has argued towards a condition of these prostitutes that could be termed as being ‘sexually liberated.’ In Latin American societies, prostitutes often bear the brunt of the social stigma of the “whore” as a result of its heavily gendered nature. In such a social scenario Gabriel García Márquez’s and Mario Vargas Llosa’s depiction of a world where prostitutes strive to become agents of change of their own social condition to emerge as liberated and emancipated despite being victims of marginalization, approximates the social reality of Latin America where liberation of prostitutes can be deemed possible not only when they defy traditional stereotypical roles ascribed to women, but also when society acknowledges them as women deserving respect and equal social status as human beings.