

# The Native world-view as a Resistance to Eurocentrism: An analysis of *El reino de este mundo* by Alejo Carpentier and *Hombres de maíz* by Miguel Ángel Asturias

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**Abstract**—The article proposes an analysis of *El reino de este mundo* (1949) by Alejo Carpentier and *Hombres de maíz* (1949) by Miguel Ángel Asturias as non-Eurocentric works. The two indigenista works, despite their dissimilar plots, are similar in how they address the indigenous issues. Both *El reino de este mundo* and *Hombres de maíz* are known to be works that mark the peak of the indigenista literary tradition. Unlike earlier works of the genre, like *Aves sin nido*, *Raza de bronce* and *Huasipungo* that focus on realism to portray the indigenous issues, the two novels use a blend of myth and reality to encapsulate the indigenous world. *El reino de este mundo*'s *lo real maravilloso* provides unique perspectives on Latin America. Likewise, *Hombres de maíz*, through its magic realism, presents the otherness from a distinctively American perspective. Correspondences between *Hombres de maíz* and *El reino de este mundo* include the use of fantastic elements, association with nature, cultural alterity, representation of curse and ritual, cyclic form of time and a reinterpretation of native society. Both the work problematizes the Western world-views, underscoring a cultural alterity. The works utilize the native perspectives, ancient indigenous mythologies, ritual and practices as tools to project indigeneity as a resistance to colonialism.

**Keywords:** Eurocentrism, indigenista, indigeneity, alterity, worldviews, mythologies.

## Introduction

The authors of the indigenista tradition before 1949 worked in the restrictive framework of Eurocentrism. The paternalistic impulses of the elite mestizo class were the driving force of indigenismo. As Juan Battsoso argues the indigenous communities "reject the presence of intermediators and deny that people who do not belong to their cultural world have the right to speak in their names or, worse, represent them [1]." The Eurocentric ways of understanding the 'other' were used as a privileged point to understand the indigenous communities. It was in the year 1949, with the publication of *El reino de este mundo* and *Hombres de maíz*, that indigenismo incorporated the indigenous worldview. In the form of the Magic Realism and *lo real maravilloso*, the two works for the first made a departure from the conventional

ways of understanding the indigenous communities from a Eurocentric perspective. For the first time, the two-works naturalized native worldview in the indigenista narratives. The two authors with their respective works made a breakaway from the epistemic habit of the earlier authors. They didn't condemn Eurocentrism in their works rather they highlighted the indigenous values, indigenous way of thinking and indigenous institutions. *El reino de este mundo* and *Hombres de maíz* are not anti- Eurocentric or Europhobic, they are simply non – Eurocentric voices posing a natural resistance to Eurocentrism.

Ariel Dorfman, in 1968, highlighting the importance of *El reino de este mundo* and *Hombres de maíz*, pointed out that ... "the contemporary Spanish American novels has a quite precise date of birth. It is the year 1949. When Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* and Miguel Angel Asturias's *Hombres de maíz* saw the light of day [2]". With the publication of the two works, the indigenista literary tradition experienced a paradigm shift. For the first time, Latin America was taken up as a subject. The two works initiated a breaking away from Western novelistic traditions. The present article intends to highlight those elements of the two narratives which give the works an exclusively Latin American identity.

*Lo real maravilloso* and magic realism, two extraordinary genres of literature were employed to present the Latin American modes of perceiving reality. The use of the two genres not only introduced the world to the fantastic elements of daily life of Latin American continent but also initiated a process of deeuropization on of the indigenista novels.

The two works challenge the Western notion of reality. Gaspar Llom and Mackandal are the two representatives of the indigenous and slave communities respectively. Gaspar Llom is the cacique of Llom, the master and guide of the indigenous community. Likewise, Mackandal too is an inspirational figure in the slave community. They are blessed with extraordinary powers. The land communicates with Gaspar freely. It expresses its grievances to him, it criticizes him for being

inactive and it provokes him to rise in arms against the enemies. He is aided by both nature and creatures in his fight to reconquer the land from the *maiceros*. The *conejos amarillos* apprise him of the imminent danger and approaching enemy. To get rid of the poison given by his enemies, he drinks the whole river dry. Similarly, Mackandal can freely converse with plants and animal. He disguises himself from his enemies by taking forms of different creatures. He is omnipresent and appears and disappear at will. These qualities of the indigenous heroes are in sharp contrast with views the western civilization hold on the indigenous communities. Though the Eurocentric perception about the natives evolved with time, they never reached the point where they could comprehend the essence of the fantastic elements in day to day life of Latin America. The two characters jolt the Eurocentric view of knowledge. The most inconvenient quality of the two heroes (from a Eurocentric perspective) is their ability to decipher the strategies of subjugation used by the colonizers. The proactive, agile and clever heroes of the novels make a sheer mockery of the Western civilization's rigorous pursuit to know the 'other'.

In both the novels, one sees an inextricable bond between the characters and nature. It is something beyond the general harmony between man and nature. Man and nature are synonymous in the case of the two novels. An association with nature and its creatures is an inseparable part of the characters' existence. In *El reino de este mundo*, Te Noel and Mackandal talk to animals and other living creatures. Similarly, creatures of Psigüilito obey the commands of Gaspar Llom. Nicho Aquino transforms into a coyote. Human beings, in the two novels, are an inextricable part of nature. The Eurocentric view that (white) man is at the centre of universe and nature and man are two separate entities is contested in the novels. Man, in the two works, is not the supreme being but a part of the world which include all living things.

The Eurocentrism perceives nature as an external object. The European man's fascination towards Latin American nature, his tendency of comparing anything unknown (non-European) with the known (European) and his inability to naturally connect with nature are well documented in the chronicles of the explorers. Paulina Bonaparte inherits this tendency and comes to the tropic with eyes of an explorer, with a preconceived notion of admiring, anything and everything, that she comes across as exotic. With the passage of time, she realizes that the world she considers exotic is as real as her own world. In *Hombres de maíz* the *maiceros'* ruthless use of the land exposes the unsustainable Eurocentric mode of commerce which misuses nature and things to gain profit.

A desire to go back to one's root is a dominant feeling in the characters of the two novels. In *El reino de este mundo*, Mackandal, Ti Noel, Bouckman and other slaves yearn for a black kingdom. In fact, they resort to practices like *voodoo* and black magic to destroy the white colonizers. In *Hombres de*

*maíz*, the cultural alterity is manifested in the form of anxiety, restiveness, and discomposure in its characters.

The tale of conflict with the colonizers begins after the death of the heroes. Their disappearance initiates a sense of cultural alterity in the two colonized communities. In *Hombres de maíz*, the death of Gaspar Llom results in the loss of rationality among the indigenous community. Uprooted and defeated, they lose their history. It is due to this forgotten history; the indigenous culture experience deterioration and distortion. In fact, it is this discontinuance that makes them behave irrationally, drives them crazy and makes them impulsive. It is through this perpetual sense of loss, *Hombres de maíz* manifests the power of the indigenous culture. It is only the strength of the tradition and culture of the indigenous community that even after the passing of many years, the indigenous culture remains alive in the subconscious of Goyo Yic, Nicho Aquino and María Tecún and impel them to comeback, to start a fresh. The same tradition and culture is portrayed in *El Reino de este mundo* wherein the death of Mackandal is perceived as the beginning of the end of the colonizers. Although the colonizers make a public show of Mackandal execution, as a warning to the other slaves and to prove the banality of his existence, the slaves go back smiling, sure that Mackandal's spirit is alive and ready to take revenge on the colonizers. The slaves' reaction surprises the colonizers. Lenormand de Mezy is so astonished by the indifference of the slave that he discusses the matter with his wife.

Aquella tarde los esclavos regresaron a sus haciendas riendo por todo el camino. Mackandal había cumplido su promesa, permaneciendo en el reino de este mundo. Una vez más eran birlados los blancos por los Altos Poderes de la Otra Orilla. Y mientras Monsieur Lenormand de Mezy, de gorro de dormir, comentaba con su beata esposa la insensibilidad de los negros ante el suplicio de un semejante –sacando de ello ciertas consideraciones filosóficas sobre la desigualdad de las razas humanas... [3]

In *Hombres de maíz*, cultural alterity is also manifested in the events that shape the culmination of the novel: Gaspar Llom reappears to guide the Coyote, Nicho Aquino realizes that suspecting his wife was a mistake, after a long frenetic search, Goyo Yic finally finds María Tecún and return to start afresh and the confusion, chaos and mayhem which plagued the indigenous character after the suicide of the Gaspar Llom, fade away.

Cultural alterity is indigenous community's answer to Europe's civilizing project. The two novels contest the Eurocentric notion of superiority of Western culture and its inherent wish to transform native way of life as per the European definition of culture.

The idea of revenge is predominant in both the novels. The violent death of both the heroes, are accompanied with curses. These curses are of special significance. They are not

mere rants, or inability to retaliate, but are (seen as) potent weapons of destruction. In fact, so powerful are the curses that we see them fulfilled exactly as they are meant. Empiricist in their orientation, the colonizers pay no attention to the curses, rejecting them as just another superstition of the indigenous communities.

To understand the essence of curse or to believe in the power of curse is to defy the empiricist European logic. Though the culture of curse or the practice of cursing is not confined to the indigenous community alone, it certainly defies the European empiricist way of thinking. The progressive logic of Renaissance long rejected such beliefs as retrogressive. Eurocentric modes of perception, therefore, fail to accept curse as something meaningful. Curses, nevertheless, are a sacred weapon of the indigenous society which are used as a last resort. In *Hombres de maíz*, the curse is not given by a member of indigenous community but by the flying wizards. Coronel Chalo Godoy (who dies seven years after the destruction Psigüilito) is taken away by the curse of the flying wizards. He represents a Eurocentric mind which rubbishes such belief systems. He brags about his own prowess and military values and while he is busy flaunting his military acumen, the forest fire zeroes in on him and devours him in no time. All the people who are directly or indirectly involved in the destruction of Psigüilito succumb to the curse. Mackandal's curse finally fulfils when the colonizers in a slave uprising are ousted.

Both the authors use the idea of curse to prove that empiricism is not the one and only way of knowing and understanding things.

The sense of time is another notable factor which is worth highlighting. The lack of linearity of time in both the narratives is another typical Latin American aspect. In *Hombres de maíz* events do not occur in a linear form. The events take place in a cyclic manner. The events of the past manifest itself in the present. It goes hand in hand with the present. Moreover, the characters defy all logics of linear sense of time. They appear and disappear as if they were impervious to the passing of time. In *El Reino de este* too, the cyclic manifestation of time is evident. Repetition of events never allows the story to attain a linear form. With the death of Mackandal the slave rebellion comes to an end and although he becomes a legend in the eyes of the slaves, the oppression of the colonizers continues. Though Boukman's rebellion successfully chases away the colonizers, it fails to dismantle the colonial institutions and the oppression continues. Henri Christophe regime replaces the French colonizers. Later, Henry Christophe too is overthrown by another repressive government. It is hinted in the end that the new government too must be overthrown.

In *Hombres de maíz*, the union of Goyo Yic and María Tecún at the end of the novel is another example of cyclic

concept of time and little difference the indigenous communities see in the past and the present. The past is seen to be present in the present, it is perpetual and persistent.

The two novels also revisit the concept of *barbarie*. The criticism of 'civilization' in earlier literary works that appeared before 1949 were made but in a restrictive manner. They were tales of atrocities, suffering and oppression all told in the form of Eurocentric way of social protest. The two works view the indigenous issues from indigenous perspectives. They go deep in the minds of the people considered voiceless, manifest their modes of perception and the way they conceive reality.

In *Hombres de maíz*, the story begins with Psigüilito and his cacique. With slow and steady pace, the author introduces the reader to the indigenous world. The appearance of colonizer, later on, do very little to divert the focus of the reader towards the colonizer. Though Psigüilito is lost in oblivion, the narrative never shifts focus away from the inhabitant of the perished village. They and their lives retain the center-stage. The loss in the conflict has not done as much harm to the community as the loss of memory of their origin. The deviated indigenous characters of the post-conflict period suffer and wander in despair because they have lost touch with their indigenous culture. These characters do not fit in the society of the colonizer. Their way of life, modes of perceptions, are dissimilar. Their inability to adjust to the Western way of life has been reasoned out in the novel, and reasoned out in the simplest way possible. They do not fit in the Western world because they have a world of their own. They cannot think like the colonizers because they have a thought process of their own. The tradition, custom, practices are not fit to be superimposed on the indigenous culture. The difficulty to apply the European value-system is not because the indigenous societies lack a tradition, custom, culture or practice but because the indigenous societies have their own institutions and are, at least for them, irreplaceable.

*El reino de este mundo* re-examine the concept of civilization as well as *barbarie*. The perversion of the colonizers is demonstrated by their attitude towards the slave women and woman in general. Lenormand de Mezy, the master, violates slave women on a routine basis. Although his debauchery goes against his European values, his Eurocentric notion of self as master of the 'other', gives him the audacity to indulge in debauchery.

The *barbarie* too is treated in a different light. Much before the bloody massacre of the French colonizers, Ti Noel defiles the master's wife in his imagination. Apart from the possible carnal fascination of Ti Noel which leads him to rape master's wife, a sense of hatred motivates Ti Noel to kill his master's wife. She is killed because she is the wife of the master (who violates slave women) and also because she is mean to slave women.

This revenge of Ti Noel is a revenge on behalf of the black kingdom. Violent and unprincipled, the slave community plays the game of tit for tat. Ti Noel abominable act implies a conflict between the two worlds. Savage is, in fact, a conscious thinker, one sensible of his own people and culture. In his revenge, there is a deep-rooted sense of alterity.

### Conclusion

From the above analysis of the novels as non-Eurocentric works, it is clear that there are several elements (of native worldviews) in both the works which make them stand out as peculiarly Latin American novels. The present article has carried out the analysis of the works based on various events, techniques and subject matters that appear in the novels. A further analysis of the novels using tools of contemporary literary theories can reveal many more elements of the novels that challenge Eurocentric worldviews. Application of theories such as Postcolonialism, Marxism and Postmodernism to the works have a potential to bring forth many more elements like the ones examined in the article.

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