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Marquez's "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World": A Man of Multifaceted Significance

Nurun Nahar [α] & Md. Abdul Momen Sarker [σ]

Abstract- **"The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" is a short story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez that features a drowned, dead man's arrival at a remote island. The story demands attention as a dead man makes the islanders' existence meaningful, he magically alters a solid reality and contributes to social integration and disintegration. To reflect on these particular aspects, this paper has relied on Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism to some extent, use of magic realism and Talcott Parsons' theory regarding social unification. Selecting the short story as the primary source, the paper here has attempted to unveil how a dead man can bring a change to a living community.**

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I. Introduction

The way Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells stories of man, woman and the world around, retains a mesmerizing beauty that, at the same time, throws the reader profoundly into the confusion while glues them to it. "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World", a short story, for instance, equally has an attraction due to an inherent ease, fluidity and impeccable composition. This particular trait of Marquez's writing where "a special sense of wonder through describing a world where ice is no more or less remarkable than a ghost who keeps bothering you in your bathroom, a world where the risk of children being born with pig's tails is accepted as a fact of life" (Jordison, "Gabriel García Márquez") distinguishes him considerably from his contemporaries. However, the story creates an irresolvable mystery that reenergizes the tension between fiction and reality. Since the story revolves around a dead man's arrival at a small island, the distinction of Marquez's writing is reflected through the approach the islanders show towards the dead man regarding which there is a generalized belief that in Marquez's writings "the narrative's emphasis is placed, not on the story, but rather on how the story is told" (Pelayo 20).It is not like any suspense or detective story where everyone gets busy with identifying the dead man; instead it is a story where everyone on the island gets immersed in the dead man's existence diversely. In spite of being a dead man, the corpse magically surprises, shocks, excites, unifies and even disintegratesthe islanders. What Marquez imbues the dead man with or who is he becomes the most researchable question in the story. To find out a satisfactory answer to this question this paper has explored several possibilities. What does the dead man stand for – in answer, this paper has analyzed the polarizations between existence and non-existence, magicand reality, and finally social integration and disintegration. It is to be mentioned that in the course of the story the dead man gets the name Esteban that comes intuitively to the islanders' mind. However, Esteban gets entangled with an existential as well as non-existential presence – his death turns him into a non-existing being while his passive influence over the islanders marks him as an existing entity. This particular duality of Esteban has been analyzed in light of Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism. Secondly, how the magical appearance of Esteban changes the reality of a small island community – this question has been discussed focusing on the instrumenting purpose of magic realism. Finally, the paper has shed light on the integration and disintegration of a small island community under the theory of social integration and disintegration of Talcott Parsons. It would be a matter of better understanding if researched into the fact how a dead man can unsettle a communal existence. In this respect, this paper aims to find out which possible significances Esteban can stand for.

II. Methodology

The primary source of this paper has been decided to be Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World." To get a desirable answer to the question what this dead man represents, this paper has taken help of Sartre's existentialism, reflected on the nature of magic realism as well as Talcott Parsons' social theory of integration and disintegration. The paper has not attempted to bring a worldly identity of the dead man to the light, instead it has argued to divulge an abstraction this dead man stands for.

a) The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World

"The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" is short story written by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in 1968. The story is based on a dead man, a drowned one who reaches the island as a corpse. The children on the beach first notice him and inform the elder ones who

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ultimately bring the dead man to their island. Therefore, the man residents all go out as they are very small in number, but the women stay beside the dead man. They wash his body and face, admire him, compare him with their husbands, find out his vulnerabilities, sympathize with him, sacrifice their precious materials for him, give a name to his soulless body, revere him profoundly and at last let him wither with grandeur. The entire story is told as if a dead man is spiritually enriching an entire community. The question, however, hangs on what significance this dead man bears.

b) A wanderer between existence and non-existence

The dead man who the islanders name as Esteban does not have any worldly capacity to be a part of the island, but unknowingly he starts belonging to the psychological as well as physical space of it. Before identifying the space of Esteban specifically, it would be more understandable if the nature of existence and non-existence gets little connectedly briefed. According to Samuel Enoch Stumpf and James Fieser's study on philosophy "some philosophers of the eighteenth century… retained the notion that people possess a "human nature" – a nature that is found in every person. Each person … is a particular example of the universal conception of Humanity (434)." Esteban represents human shape and characteristics as he encroaches on gradually everyday life of common islanders. He does have a uniformity with the people on the island in terms of physique, but he cannot express his human nature. However, the women on the island imagine what would be his movement and behavior if he would be alive. This is, therefore, the starting process where Esteban bodily declares his belongingness to the community. And Esteban retains something extra that enlarges his existence beyond death. Esteban cannot breathe, but he makes the islanders sigh for him; he cannot move, but he makes all the islanders come after him at his last moments; he cannot take active part in worldly matters, but he provokes all the islanders to think differently of their worldly activity. Therefore, what does it signify – can it be declared that Esteban exists? In the language of Samuel Enoch Stumpf, James Fieser and Sartre's existentialism believes: "we are what we make of ourselves, we have no one to blame for what we are except ourselves (434)." As Esteban cannot choose what he wants or likes, according to Sartre's existentialism, he does not exist. Therefore, who Esteban is – what is he who exists and not-exists at the same time. Esteban exists as an ideal of beauty, spirit, and strength. Even his dead body stirs an entire community to think beyond their known boundary; but at the same time, he does not exist as he does not actively want to change these islanders. And it is all even greater surprise when a dead man retains the capacity to change an entire village what gets expressed in the language of the narrator of the story:

> *They did not need to look at one another to realize that they were no longer all present, that they would never be. But they also knew that everything would be different from then on, that their houses would have wider doors, higher ceilings, and stronger floors so that Esteban's memory could go everywhere without bumping into beams and so that no one in the future would dare whisper the big boob finally died, too bad, the handsome fool has finally died, because they were going to paint their house fronts gay colors to make Esteban's memory eternal…* (Marquez, "The Handsomest Drowned in the World")

This is where probably Marquez employs the miracles of life. A non-existing being brings a forever change to the existence of a community. And this is where the debate arises – who exists and who does not. In spite of being a dead man, Esteban opens a range of choices in front of the islanders who now would live differently from each other. On the other hand, the islanders who physically exist come out to decorate their life in the memory of Esteban. This is how in the spirit and memory of a community, a non-existing one can even live forever while the living ones seem dead in spite of being alive.

a) A Magic Realistic Handsomest Drowned Man

In delineating magic realism Lois Parkinson Zamora suggests in an article titled "Swords and Silver Rings: Magical Objects in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez": "Whether the magic is thought to inhere in the real, or whether it pre-exists the real according to cultural or philosophical systems of belief, objects in magical-realist texts operate with symbolic energies that are distinct from those in realistic texts (Zamora 31)." The object having magic realism inhered in it functions symbolically, but it brings change to the real. Therefore, it becomes really difficult to realize the difference between magic and reality. In the story, Marquez lets one dead man come into an island's everyday life, but the dead man is not decomposed or odorous; instead, it is full of good-look and masculinity regarding which it has been remarked in the story: "Fascinated by his huge size and his beauty, the women then decided to make him some pants from a large piece of sail and a shirt from some bridal linen so that he could continue through his death with dignity" (Marquez "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World") Why does Marquez write about such a magical appearance of a dead man? Why should a calm, quiet life of an island need to face a sudden change? To answer this question, it would be appropriate to quote from Wen-chin Ouyang, remarked in introduction chapter of "Empire, Nation, Magic":

> *Magical realism, in its combination of the fantastic and the real, has been producing political discourses that partake in imagining communities as*

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'limited, sovereign' nations with roots in 'time immemorial' derived from what are often termed 'local' or 'indigenous' myths, religions and cultures, while subverting realism that has been so much part of the post-Enlightenment empirical worldview that included nationalism (Ouyang 225).

In light of the stated-above-definition of magic realism, Esteban turns into an object that the whole island community gets engaged in. Absorbing the essence of the land and the inhabitants there, the drowned man magically changes into a larger-than-life figure who retains the power to encroach on everyone's life around. From a material figure Esteban's transformation into an immemorial one is going to intervene in every aspect of the islanders' life. Marquez, therefore, tries to establish the dead man as an enriched past through the inclusion of magic realist ingredients in the story. The islanders who never have come to meet him, who never even know the life beyond the small island, they suddenly name him as Esteban, adore him, plan to design their future keeping him on the mind – all these certainly refer to the radical transformation of society keeping faith in any particular idea. In literary texts, therefore, no other device can better explain such huge collective transformation except magic realism. Instrumentation of magic realism as political, religious, local ideology is one of the significant techniques in contemporary fictions. In this particular story of Marquez, Esteban's magical appearance is the originating point of a myth that this community is going to preserve for a long time.

b) A symbol of integration and disintegration

The moment Esteban reaches the island, there happen lots of revelations regarding the place as well as the inhabitants. While the men go out to find out the dead one's real identity, the women stay behind. The women think of the dead man, they get enchanted with him, they find a way to give expression to their untold desires. At this particular point, therefore, the society gets divided. In the text, it has been remarked:

The men thought the fuss was only womanish frivolity. Fatigued because of the difficult nighttime inquiries, all they wanted was to get rid of the bother of the newcomer once and for all before the sun grew strong on that arid, windless day…But the more they hurried, the more the women thought of ways to waste time. They walked about like startled hens, pecking with the sea charms on their breasts, some interfering on one side to put a scapular of the good wind on the drowned man…

*(*Marquez, "The Handsomest Drowned in the World*")*

For the first time, the society gets divided into man's world and woman's world. What the man considers as "womanish frivolity" becomes a womanly instrument to articulate their cherished dreams and wishes. Marquez also refers that from then on, the women of the island are not going to dwell on the thought of their husbands; instead, they are going to dive deep in this young man who represents the imaginary perfection everyone dreams of. "But they also knew that everything would be different from then on…" (Marquez, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World") This assertion, therefore, brings the end to light how a society falls apart. This paper has depended on Parsons' theorization regarding this fact that says:

Parsons recognized that no actual social system was ever likely to attain perfect integration. Some "slippage" was always to be expected. For example, some individuals may want to comply with particular role expectations, but be unable to do so. At the opposite extreme, however, Parsons considered and rejected the possibility of complete disintegration (Abrahamson 48).

Reflection of what Parsons believes regarding integration and disintegration of a society finds a discernable description in the short story. All the islanders get integrated at one point that the dead man, Esteban, is not like them and he deserves a grand departure, but at the same time they get disintegrated as the women on the island are going to dream of a dead man from then on instead of their husbands and their houses as well as memories are going to be reshaped from then on. Therefore, the dead man becomes a symbol of both integration and disintegration. The question, however, persists what this dead man symbolizes. According to Parsons, as a society cannot wholly be integrated of disintegrated, there exists a point which functions as the catalyst of integration and disintegration. Esteban is a representation of difference, beauty, inspiration that the women of the island cherish on their minds. Finding him, they have got the way to finally touch their dream. To them, the dead man becomes a past filled with pleasure, love, and satisfaction. The men of the island, on the other hand, have come to discover a new face of their wives through the arrival of Esteban. Here comes a revelation of disintegration, while the islanders come to realize that their houses need bigger doors and their infrastructure of everything needs to be enlarged so that Esteban's memory can wander around freely. This is, therefore, the point to be integrated. Through this process, therefore, Esteban appears to be a past who reenergizes and brings a fresh wave of change side by side. To the islanders, he is a memory to be enthralled again and again and a reminder to the foundational social requirement, that is, integration and disintegration.

III. Conclusion

Gabriel Garcia Marquez has a remarkable storytelling Capacity, and this particular quality of his

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gets another dimension when he incorporates unreal into reality. In this short story, Marquez enters collective psychology through an individual named Esteban. However, Esteban becomes an entity that goes beyond a mere person; instead, he appears to be a dead person raising multiple debates regarding existence, reality, and society. This paper has tried to discover possible significances of Esteban's appearance on the island. What Marquez articulates in the course of the story is not an enchanting tale only to savor; rather, he tries to make connection to the essence of the land and human beings. In doing so Marquez often takes help of different techniques that make his way easy to say whatever he strives to say. "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World" is such an example that seems a story of far-away and unrecognizable land, but it is a story of life, living, and beyond-life.

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