Canonization: The Megalomaniac's Way to Dictate the State

Tahsina Yasmin
Assistant Professor of English,
Daffodil International University, Dhaka

Abstract: The Autumn of the Patriarch *(1975) by the celebrated Boom author Gabriel García Márquez and* The Lizard's Tail *(1983) by the Argentine author Luisa Valenzuela expose dictator/ruler with physical deformity and supernatural power. The first portrays an unnamed dictator in the Caribbean living for ages and the latter the historical López Rega, Isabel Perón's minister of social well-being in Argentina ruling through sorcery. Within the usual but marvelous Latin American literary framework of magic realism, incoherent narrative, and various perspectives in story-telling, both the novels surprisingly show the use of canonization through which the megalomaniac dictator/ruler dominates the state and its people. García Márquez's dictator sanctifies his mother, the birdwoman Bendición Alvarado, by false means to maintain power. Valenzuela's competitor (metaphorical) in the writing of the biography of the Sorcerer, López Rega, first benefits from the canonization of Eva Perón (the Dead Woman) and then sanctifies himself to sustain power. The paper aims to show a comparative analysis of the two Latin American dictator novels in the light of theories on gender studies, power and psychoanalysis in terms of their representation of mother figures and how the process of canonization is used to create an ideological fantasy among the superstitiously manacled, awe-struck people to perpetuate power.*

Moses, in an article on Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat,* focalizes the preternatural reign of "the fictional dictator of *The Autumn of the Patriarch* who lives to be over 200 years old and, in a career coextensive with the history of modern Latin America, tyrannizes his island nation for what seems to his abject countrymen an eternity" and compares this magical representation with the nearly 32 year long reign of the Dominican tyrant Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Gabriel García Márquez, in the quite sympathetic depiction of his forlorn dictator tangled in the pursuit and detainment of power, actually represents what is true in so many other contexts in Latin American countries ruled by dictators. In addition to all the celebrated Boom authors like García Márquez and Vargas Llosa, "Luisa Valenzuela is the heiress of Latin American fiction. She wears an opulent, baroque crown, but her feet are naked" (Carlos Fuentes, qtd. in Stavans 316). *The Lizard's Tail* is her struggle as an author in writing the biography of López Rega, who tries to overpower her in the narrative. While praising Valenzuela's surrealistic language, Gerald Martin comments on the portrayal of the historical López Rega, "The self-styled minister of social welfare is viewed as a deranged evil genius engaged in some atavistic crusade to be achieved through hideous blood rituals" (355-56). This paper compares the two

dictator novels with the aim to show a similar approach toward the use of canonization by the protagonists as a means to substantiate power in dictating the states. In the process, theories on gender studies, power and psychoanalysis are consulted and discussed to validate the parallel attitude of the dictators toward the mother figures. Religious sanctification in an obvious manner arms the dictators to create an ideological fantasy among the people.

> *The Autumn of the Patriarch* presents a General ruling an unnamed Caribbean island who lives to be anywhere between 107 and 232 years old, sires 5,000 children, all runts, all born after seven-month gestations. He is a bird woman's bastard, conceived in a storm of bluebottle flies, born in a convent doorway, gifted at birth with huge, deformed feet and an enlarged testicle the size of a fig, which whistles a tune of pain to him every moment of his impossibly long life. (Kennedy)

His mother, Bendición Alvarado, is the one "who dared scold him for the rancid onion smell of his armpits" (16). She is portrayed with all the traditional maternal abilities of giving birth in a difficult condition, rearing her son through struggle, maintaining the household, etc. She is placed in her suburban mansion where the General goes to visit her and "… she in her maternal rocking chair, decrepit but with her soul intact, tossing handfuls of grains to the hens and the peacocks …" (18). She suffers all through her life and even has to appear in the commercial district dressed in a flowered dress buying a feathered hat and junk from the stores when Patricio Aragonés, the General's look alike has been killed and the government does not want to spread the news. She says, "Even I believed that it was really my son who had died, and they forced me to smile when people took full-length pictures of me because the military men said it had to be done for the good of the country" (23). When the General was experiencing "life without him" and watching "his" body being desecrated, his anguished refrains of "mother" lead him to a bloody execution of the treacherous generals and members of the parliament with a declaration "from now on I'm going to rule alone with no dogs to bark at me" (27).

> The herniated General has a Jesus-like birth story:
>
> … he knew that he was a man without a father like the most illustrious despots of history, that the only relative known to him and perhaps the only one he had was his mother of my heart Bendición Alvarado to whom the school texts attributed the miracle of having conceived him without recourse to any male and of having received in a dream the hermetical keys to his messianic destiny.(40)

The General's adulation of his mother is made obvious as he considers "no one the son of anyone except his mother, and only her" and proclaims her as "the matriarch of the land by decree" (40). However, the birdwoman with uncertain origin and "simpleness of soul" fails to prove her worth for the presidential palace as the fanatics of presidential dignity feel embarrassed at her spreading wet clothes to dry on the balcony from where speeches are delivered, or at her comfort in staying at the maids' quarters, or at her bidding of the President to return empty bottles to the nearby shop on his way. She even goes to the extent of saying in front of the ambassadors that she would have put her son to school if only she knew that he would be the president of the republic, wondering at the grandeur of his appearance. She lived by helping others get healed with her medicinal herbs. She saw poverty at its worst and keeps on directing her son to save up for the future not knowing the fact that she is the richest lady in the land with the accumulated wealth that the General put in her name. Ironically, she comments, "you're only a general, so you're not good for anything except to command" (52). The simple lady could not even understand her son's transformation as he keeps political secrets away from her. Even though he separates her from his political life at the presidential palace, every night when he goes to sleep and says "goodnight" to her, she responds likewise from her suburban mansion. The innate tie with the mother leads the General to believe that her death is a mysterious one and he canonizes her.

The incoherent events that are narrated by various narrators in an almost incomprehensible manner with extraordinary long winding sentences spanning three or four pages, take a turn with Bendición Alvarado's sickness and death. The General has seen astonishing happenings in nature and in his country, and lives on defying death. Characters appear and disappear in his life and in the narrative, but he and his mother live on until one day at his mother's bidding, he discovers to his horror the "steaming ulcers" chewing her back. The mighty ruthless

pervert General nurses his dying mother like a child and shares his meal with her using the same utensils against the advice of the Minister of Health who fears it is some Indian curse. When one Monday morning he finds her gone, he also finds the imprint of her body with her hand on her heart on the linen which could not be erased "because it was integrated front and back into the very material of the linen, and it was eternal linen" (113). As the nationwide mourning takes place with the corpse in display in the farthest corners of the country, a rumor is spread of the living signs of the dead body and people start selling her relics. When the General gets the news of the miracles, he calls on the nuncio from Rome to authorize the canonization of his mother. However, the nuncio refuses to do this by declaring that the imprint on the linen was done by painting. As a result, the holy man faces the terrible wrath of the superstitious people of the country. Later on, Monsignor Demetrius Aldous discovers that the uncorrupted body and the selling of relics are the making of the proselytes of the General. Power-hungry people around the General have been stuffing and decorating the dead body of his mother so that what remains now is "a demolished mother." Even after knowing the facts, the General does not disclose this to the religiously fanatic people of the country who go on demolishing the Catholic churches due to the refusal of her canonization. The dictator then proclaims "the civil sainthood of Bendición Alvarado by the supreme decision of the *free and sovereign people*" [emphasis added] (133). She becomes "patroness of the nation,""curer of the ill,""mistress of birds" and the cult of Saint Bendición Alvarado of the Birds gets established.

The Lizard's Tail with its confusing narrative and multiple narrators presents an author forever in struggle with "the Papoose"/"Eulogio"/"the Sorcerer"/"Estrella"/"Sixfingers"/"the witchdoc"/"the Sawman"/"Red Ant" whose biography she is writing. The Sorcerer makes the Tacurú, modeled on his childhood favorite anthill, to hide away from the President and perform his sorcery in the winding tunnels, passageways and dungeons. Born with three testicles, raised by a family in the lagoon as his mother died giving birth to him, the Sorcerer's childhood is a disturbing one. His lifelong obsession is with his sister from the adopted parents Don Ciriaco and Doña Rosa, Sixfingers, who he calls his first love; with his third testicle, Estrella, who he calls his great love and with the Dead Woman (Eva Perón) who he missed in his lifetime but venerates for her mysterious power in curing people. Though he renounces sex, he satisfies Madam President Isabel Perón (in his words, the Intruder) to secure his position – "the power she held over her people was actually a power that came from him, her Master" (25). In a sexually explicit manner the Sorcerer dares say, "*I am the Master, because love cannot master me./I do not breed. I never scatter myself"* (25).

The sarcophagus of the Dead Woman is restored to the Sorcerer, the Generalissimo and the Intruder. They feel excited at the prospect of opening up the coffin and looking at her after twenty years. They organize a ceremony with chants and incense in the mortuary to uncover her embalmed body. They use a diamond to cut through the glass. The entire High Command is called on by the Intruder and the canonization process is talked about. They plan to build a sanctuary with the mausoleum in the center, a monument of solid gold studded with diamonds so that people can come and venerate her. When somebody suggests examining the corpse to be sure it is really the Dead Woman, the Colonel Doctor proposes to amputate a finger and match it with her fingerprint. Against the protests of the Generalissimo – her husband – the finger is cut off. However, the Sorcerer has another plan to replace the finger of the Dead Woman. He wants to drink the water where the finger is submerged so that it is circulated throughout his body: "I shall have the essence of the only woman who matters to me, and Estrella will receive the benefits of a digital femininity that will show her the way" (86). After replacing the forefinger with a blonde's finger, and getting hold of the sacred finger, he feels, "I am the fathermother neuron. I am also my eminent destiny as pointed out to me by the Finger. The Finger is all I need to fulfill myself, it's what is lacking in my aide" (91). After the death of the Generalissimo, the Sorcerer continues sanctifying her by spreading her miracles and the people continue praying to her with "votive candles, reliquaries," gifts in exchange of things that they ask for from her. A voice in the novel utters, "Superstition is slowly hemming us in. Superstition that goes by the name of fear" (66).

Later the megalomaniac builds a human-pyramid to sanctify himself as the Master of Black Lagoon and prepares a masque to inaugurate the splendid work. He hands over a terracotta mask to each of the guests and makes them drink a bowl of the broth prepared with the dead body of the once blind all-knowing Machi who dared contradict him in matters of sacrificing twenty thousand workers of the pyramid.

> He would no longer be in his own incarnation, anyway. He would be in each and everyone of his guests who wore his mask. His face. With eyes the exact tone of gray of his own eyes, in tiny holes in the pupils so the guests could look through those eyes. His eyes. Then nothing of what they were to see or what they saw would be offensive to them. (138)

The gory event ends with a trance of the Sorcerer, and the clubbing and bashing of the guests when they attempt to break each other's mask in frenzy. Later when the people of the town of Capivarí build a pseudo-pyramid with wooden furniture, branches in order to burn the effigy of the witchdoc, he mistakenly asks his spy out of whim, "Do you think they're worshipping me?" (158). Meanwhile, the Peoplists working undercover discover the almost empty sanctuary of the Dead Woman and bring the leftover relics to the capital for the mass. The cornered Sorcerer mobilizes "the people so that they would take up the cult again and plunge into action and defend him" (165). The desire to punish the people of Capivarí starts with the disappearance of the Mayor and then the planning of a day when he will deliver a speech and ask them to be annexed with the Black Lagoon. If faced with defiance, he will bring flood upon them by opening the sluice gates of the dam. Unexpectedly, when the day arrives, the Capivaríans succumb to his feet. The uprising checked, the witchdoc concentrates on the only important thing ahead and comments on "the apparent indifference of the Central Government" as "Our new separatism is a form of self-communion so we can make love as we like and fertilize ourselves. Estrella. Adored little ball. Little ball of sweetness" (233).

With a dream of impregnating Estrella, the Sorcerer asks the Egret, his loyal aide, to prepare a cradle. He wonders "who knows what kind of cradle it will be, for who knows what kind of child. … anything engendered by me will be born by me and nourished by me. … This son will be the son of my exclusive person, because Estrella is me. This son: my continuance, my essence" (182). After collecting his semen in test tubes, he will devote himself to hormones and "develop my other aspect, the feminine one. And in that way I shall engender I, and I himself will be born – be reborn – to support me in my/his/our enterprise" (234). For this, first he decorates the inside of his sacred pyramid with mirrors with the help of blind men as workers, then builds a huge tent for the birth, and continues taking injections to make Estrella become larger. All this time the loyal Egret anoints the transsexual Sorcerer until bidden to be headed towards the sanctuary to call the appointed people back to the Black Lagoon to worship him/her. The novel ends with the death of the Sorcerer by the bursting of Estrella and the flow of a river of blood to the south as the ancient prophecy mentioned.

Both the protagonists are megalomaniacs as "the aggrandizement of the ego in the megalomania which consists in the extreme form of a normal process in addition to entailing a magnification of the ego" (Surprenant 144). The General considers himself as "the Magnificent who arose from the dead on the third day" (Márquez 29) and after his son is conceived of Leticia Nazareno, names him Emanuel. The sense of invincibility overpowers him and makes him so overbold that he shows extreme brutality like serving Major General Rodrigo de Aguilar as a decorated dish and offering the chopped off flesh on plates to the other guests-generals. The Sorcerer, the pseudo dictator, is keen on sexual experiments and violates the Indian maidens by experimenting with their uteri in order to dissolve them. In the process, if any of the girls is impregnated, he has the newborn baby served at his table with an apple in its tiny mouth and eats the flesh. This violent process is to declare to the people that "he is master of lives and properties" (Valenzuela 22). He believes, "In my hands is the fate of the country, may be the entire world, and I mustn't forget it. The pleasures of the flesh are accessories compared to the pleasures of power. They alone matter" (Valenzuela 52).

In addition, both are obsessed about the mother/mother figure in the novels. According to Freud, "obsessional neurosis has as its basis a regression owing to which a sadistic trend has been substituted for an affectionate one. It is this hostile impulsion against someone who is loved which is subjected to repression" (532). The General showers reverence for his mother and wants the whole country to do the same but at the expense of falsification which results in crude treatment of her corpse. Though not his birth mother, the Sorcerer considers the Dead Woman as "Our Lady Captain. A mother to all of us" like the country people do (Valenzuela 95). He has a perverse veneration for her and he goes to the extent of supporting the dissection of her embalmed finger, stealing it and replacing it with somebody else's. "Megalomania consisted in a 'reflexive turning back' and was equivalent to an overvaluation of the erotic object (such an overvaluation introduces variation in the aim and

object of the sexual drive)" (Surprenant 115). The General's maternal obsession, the Sorcerer's obsession about the Dead Woman as his muse in creating the aura of power around him and his obsession about self-procreation have a sexual tint in them. Disfiguring of the birdwoman's and the Dead Woman's corpses, and experimenting with the third testicle – all have in them, not only the proclamation of the supremacy of the dictators but also the treatment of the over-evaluated bodies as erotic objects.

Rivkin and Ryan in their "Introduction: Feminist Paradigms" focalize the development of feminism and gender studies. They define the Essentialists' stance, "men must abstract themselves from the material world as they separate from mothers in order to acquire a license to enter the patriarchate, and they consequently adopt a violent and aggressive posture toward the world left behind, which is now constructed as an "object" (767). This objectification can be detected in the canonization of the female figures which validates phallic power. The dead Bendición Alvarado in *The Autumn of the Patriarch* functions as an object that can be used to make profit by instigating the religious fervor of the people. Gerald Martin, while analyzing Tomás Eloy Martínez's *The Perón Novel* and comparing it with Valenzuela's *The Lizard's Tail,* comments on the historical figure of Eva Perón (the Dead Woman in the novel):

> Nothing could dramatize more clearly the condition of Latin American woman as object than the treatment of Eva Perón: little more than a good-time girl turned actress, than the Virgin Mother of the People, than a mascot embalmed and carried around the world, for the deranged López Rega to prey on like a vampire. (341)

Martin points out the similarity between *I the Supreme* and *The Lizard's Tail*:

> in particular the would-be dictator's obsession with his own self-generation and his desire for the entire world – to him a mere abstraction – to be ordered according to the pulsation of his own perverted will. Valenzuela's inclusion of herself among the guilty cannot disguise the fact that this novel links thematically Argentine solitude, writing and masculine will into a chain which needs to be deconstructed before that still unhappy country can clarify its own past and invent a new future for itself. (357)

Even when the Sorcerer experiments with his body for self-generation, his sense of separation from the previous self is evident as he asks the Egret to call him the Queen instead of Master. The Egret puts a clay mold all over his body so that he looks feminine with breasts. Thus, in sanctifying himself with the birth, the Sorcerer is overpowering the female entity.

According to Biron, "Masculinity for men functions as both an unquestioned ontological guarantor of gender identity and an unstable, ever-shifting demand for credible performances of that identity" (11). Both the protagonists continue to hold onto their identity as the invincible dictators and take actions to guarantee the continuation of their existence. The professing of their masculinity is in line with their desire to cling onto power. The canonization/sanctification of the General's mother, the Dead Woman, and the Sorcerer not only establishes cults and ensures the selling of relics, but also gives something to the superstitiously-manacled people of the country to chew on while the dictators exercise absolute power. Biron quotes Connell in establishing the relationship between masculinity and power:

> In order to think about masculinity as simultaneously a factor in establishing power positions, a constructed category of difference and hierarchy and, a desired quality, trait, or state of being, it is important to employ at a threefold model of its structure, "distinguishing relations of a) power, b) production, and c) … cathexis (emotional attachment)". (13)

While tracing the long history of horror in Latin America, Alok Bhallain "'Power, like a Desolating Pestilence': Dictatorship and Community in *The Autumn of the Patriarch"* sums up, "*The Autumn of the Patriarch* is both a political novel which analyses the origin and structure of dictatorship, as well as, a moral fable" (1597). However, as we look into these novels from the gendered point of view, the moral fables become apparent on how they represent mothers as all caring, all enveloping, all enduring traditional figures who can easily be sacrificed to climb up and stay at the top of the ladder of power. Biron justly points out, "They (the theorists of masculinity) attribute

the danger of such fictions to their being predicated on the objectification, subordination, or repudiation of femininity and women" (147).

Works Cited

Bhalla, Alok. "'Power, like a Desolating Pestilence': Dictatorship and Community in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20.38 (1985): 1597-1600. Web. 26 June 2015.

Biron, Rebecca E. *Murder and Masculinity: Violent Fictions of Twentieth-Century Latin America.* Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2000. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Essentials of Psycho-analysis.* Ed. Anna Freud. Trans. James Strachey. London: Vintage, 2005. Print.

Kennedy, William. "A Stunning Portrait of a Monstrous Caribbean Tyrant."*The New York Times*31 October 1976. Web. 20 June 2015.

Martin, Gerald. *Journeys through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fictions in the Twentieth Century.* London: Verso, 1989. Print

Márquez, Gabriel García. *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. Trans. Edith Grossman. India: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.

Moses, Michael Valdez. "Big Daddy: the Dictator Novel and the Liberation of Latin America." *The Free Library.* 2002. Reason Foundation. Web. 26 June 2015.

Rivkin, Julie and Michael Ryan. "Introduction: Feminist Paradigms." *Literary Theory: An Anthology.* 2nd ed. UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 765-769. Print.

Stavans, Ilan. "Autumn of the Matriarch?" *The Nation* 260.9 (6 March 1995): 316-19. Web. 25 June 2015.

Surprenant, Céline. *Freud: A Guide for the Perplexed.* India: Continuum, 2008. Print.

Valenzuela, Luisa. *The Lizard's Tail.* Trans. Gregory Rabassa. NY: Serpent's Tail, 1983. Print.