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COLOMBIA: The Tragic Violence

By Inca Molina Rumold, DePaul University

Ruta Pacifica (De Las Mujeres Del Suroeste Antioqueño Por La Democracia y La No Violencia)
The violence that has been haunting this South American country for over half a century was captured by García Márquez in his magnificent film script Edipus Mayor (Edipo Alcalde) of the mid-nineties, in which the Colombian drama acquires the mythic proportions of a Greek tragedy. But in Greek tragedy it is individual protagonists who demonstrate the tragic fate that can beset us mortals. In the Colombian drama, however, the fate of an entire nation is at stake. The country’s anguish finds powerful expression through the voice of a woman from Colombia’s Caribbean coast, Margarita Galindo. Her two poems “Colombian Coffee 1997” and “Oblivion Again,” both from her 1998 Collection Touched by the Angel (Tocado por el ángel), bear witness to the harrowing everyday experience of violence. Appropriately enough, the angel in question here, as the picture on the book cover—a medieval engraving—clarifies, is not at all Cupid, the angel of love, but the angel of death.

The unbearable aspect of this atrocious Colombian situation is how, instead of subsiding, it keeps growing like a malignant cancer. It started on the fateful April 9, 1949, that later became known as “el Bogotazo.” On this day, government forces assassinated Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, presidential candidate of the masses, who reacted with a bloody uprising in the streets of Bogotá. Gaitán, a lawyer trained in Colombia and Europe, had been a presidential contender from below who threatened the old power structure of the elite, shared more or less by the two traditional political parties, Conservatives and Liberals. Gaitán had created a third alternative, the Independent Party, to represent the peasants and workers who, until then, had had no voice in the political process. As a leftist democratic presidential candidate, Gaitán’s vision had been to redistribute the land through a sorely needed agrarian reform as 90% of the land was in the hands of large landholders, representing 10% of Colombia’s total population. The country is still waiting for it! Naturally, this vision constituted a dangerous challenge to the old power elite. Therefore, Gaitán’s newly formed Independent Party was both the hope of the “people” as well as a serious threat to the old power structure. Thus, the uprising of the masses was cruelly quelled and decimated by the military. Those who escaped the massacre hid in the mountains southwest of Bogota and became guerrillas, viciously persecuted by all subsequent governments.

The refusal of the government at that time to enter into a dialogue with the guerrillas and acknowledge their demands to share in the political and social process as equals must be recognized as the root of today’s unsolvable situation. Sadly, the role of the Catholic Church in this conflict was not on the side of those who needed it but was a close ally of the government. However, when Liberation Theology developed in Latin America in the course of the sixties, Colombia had its shining hero in Camilo Torres, a Catholic priest who became a spokesman for the people, and, in 1968, a martyr for their cause when he was shot in the mountains outside of Bogota by soldiers fighting the guerrillas.

Hence, what started as a small guerrilla movement by socio-politically oriented Marxists in the early fifties—and garnered respect for their idealist goals—was clearly a model for Castro’s 1959 successful revolution. For Fidel had been a witness to the Bogotazo as a participant of the Panamerican Youth conference that Bogota was hosting in those days. But then, Cuba’s size is but a fraction of Colombia, the fourth largest Latin American country.

Those early guerrillas of the fifties are now known as the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia or FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) that have meanwhile lost their ethical and moral integrity. In the past twenty years they have not only expanded considerably, but also become perniciously entangled with the growing drug traffic that shifted its coca fields from Peru to Colombia. The FARC operate from a territory southeast of Bogotá, the Caguan, that was recently cleared of all military encroachment in a governmental move to show good faith towards the peace-talks between the two parties. However, with their insane tactics of kidnapping children and forcing them to become guerrillas, their indiscriminate bombings, kidnappings for huge ransoms and assassinations, the FARC have now lost all of their credibility. There is a second, smaller guerrilla group called the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), that is especially active in the province of Magdalena along the mighty Magdalena River north of the capital, Bogotá, that seems to specialize in blowing up the oil pipe lines.

In spite of the much publicised peace dialogue between government and guerrillas since the late nineties, the conflict is far from being resolved. Instead, it has widened, as reactionary paramilitary forces (the AUC: Auto Defensas de Colombia)—assassins, armed and hired by landowners as well as drug lords to defend them against the guerrillas—join in the killings from the other side. And the government, plagued with endemic corruption, appears powerless against so many different armed groups, all of which secretly deal with the narco. The mythical Hydra with its many heads—that, if cut, grow again—is a terrible if accurate symbol for Colombia. Yet, the civil society, which is the great majority, only wishes to live in peace. No wonder then, that Colombians are seeking political refuge by the thousands in other countries, mainly USA, Spain, Ecuador, Central America. Even though some high government figures have been abducted and killed by guerrillas, those who get the brunt from both sides are the peasants living in small villages. Statistics show that the massacres committed by the paramilitary far exceed those by the guerrillas. And yet, life continues, even under the daily threat of bombs and kidnappings in the cities, and the massacre of entire peasant villages.

Yes, life continues. But how? Margarita Galindo tells us. She is from the Caribbean coast, a region that is almost like a separate country within Colombia in geografic and climactic, but above all cultural terms. Contrary to the rest of the country, here the terrain is flat and tropical, with the three seaports Cartagena—the first city built on the South American continent during the Spanish conquest—Santa Marta and Barranquilla, all three within an hour’s distance by car. Here, the African influence is substantial in the make-up of the
“costeños” who are an extremely gregarious, dance and music loving people, of an anti-authoritarian, independent spirit, as if ruled by such elemental forces as the ocean, the heat, and the wind—endearingly called “las brisas.” And it is quite indicative that there has never been a general or an archbishop from this part of the country. Instead, it is the homeland of creative spirits like the 1982 Nobel-prize winning writer Gabriel García Márquez and of his friend, the reknowned painter Alejandro Ovregón, who both immortalized this region in their respective work. But there has also been a strong group of women writers since the 1960s: novelists like Fanny Buitrago and Marvel Moreno, and poets like Meira Delmar, Lya Sierra, Claudia Lamas, Margarita Galindo. For a long time, Barranquilla, and the Caribbean coast in general, used to be a tranquil haven. But ever since the “narcos” and the self-proclaimed AUC from the 80s onward, violence has left its mark on daily life even there, as witnessed by Galindo’s poems.

Galindo, a native from Barranquilla, has been very active in her hometown’s cultural life as a reporter for newspapers and radio. She has published several collections of poetry as "Seller of Butterflies" ("Vendedor de mariposas," 1962), and "Touched by the Angel" ("Tocado por el angel," 1998). Her poems have been included in several anthologies such as “New Voices from the Turn of the Century” (“Nuevas Voces de Fin de Siglo,” 1999.)

In Galindo’s “Colombian Coffee 1997”—and what could be more emblematic of an everyday activity than coffee making?—it is the incredibly sober and understated tone that leaves an eery impression on the reader. In quick brush strokes, the exhilarating morning ritual of coffee making in the first stanza—“you can hear the music of the coffeepot”—and who hasn’t had a cup of Colombia’s famous coffee?—is suddenly followed by the reflection of how the “tenderest seeds” have been changed “to bitter fruits” and “laughter” to “blood,” capturing in nuance Colombia’s bitter and tragic situation in the second and last stanza. The simple, everyday language suddenly reveals its poignant reverse. The poem ends when the “boiling” of the coffee water merges with the poet’s feelings “and it is rage that boils/ the first sip/ with which I start/ the day.”

Café Combiano 1997
By Margarita Galindo
(C.P.V. ediciones, Barranquilla, Colombia, 1998)

Grave, la pavana
Del amanecer
Viene adelantando
Su luz por la calle.
En torno a la estufa
Las manos intentan
Detener la prisa.
Se escucha la música
De la cafetera
Que también perfuma.
Su duende rojizo
Calienta la taza
Con un beso limpio,
Para que mi boca
Saboree su historia
Al olor del aire.

Colombian Coffee 1997
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Gravely, the stately gait of dawn advances
its light along the street.
Around the stove
hands try
to stop the haste.
You can hear the music of the coffeepot
that also spreads its aroma.
Its reddish ghost
warms the cup
with a clean kiss
so that my mouth
may taste its story
in the perfume of the air.

Es café del cielo
Pudiera decirse.
Entonces recuerdo
Cómo le cambiaron
Los dulces aromas
A esta tierra triste,
Los granos más tiernos
Por frutos amargos,
La risa por sangre
Abierta al escarnio
Y es ira que hierva
El sorbo primero
Con que empecé
El día.

In her second poem, “Oblivion Again,” each line expresses the poet’s consternation at the realization that Colombia’s fate is in the hands of gods whose “eyes...have opened blind.” In equally simple and short lines like in “Coffee,” the poet evokes the dreadful reality of the years and years of violence so that “you need the running water/ of rivers/ and the whole bitter ocean/ to clean the wound” of the country that is drowning in blood and death. But the poet’s “nostalgia” for earlier peaceful times “withdraws like smoke.” Indeed, the poem evokes a fate of “mythic proportions,” where even nostalgia is “absent.”

Otra vez el olvido
Los ojos de los dioses
Se han abierto cegados.
Ausente la nostalgia
Se aleja como el humo.
Otra vez el olvido
Abre sus manos puras
Para lavar los nombres,
Los paisajes,
Las huellas vegetales
Y toda la armadura
Tremenda del presente.
El hierro del silencio
Ha sellado los labios
Con sabor a pólvera
Y solos nuestros muertos
Han mordido la tierra
Donde miles de veces
Sintieron bajo el pie
Que el suelo florecia.
Quizá junto a la sombra
El hambre se acomoda,
Como hace la paloma
En el alero claro
Y apenas un murmullo
Estremece la espiga.
Se necesita el agua
Corriente de los ríos
Y todo el mar amargo
Para limpiar la herida.
Es preciso acostarse
Amante con la muerte,
Como dijo Neruda
Hablando de otra cosa,
Para sentir los huesos
Quebrados del hermano
Y socavar su pecho
Buscándole la vida.

Oblivion Again
The eyes of the gods
Have opened blind.
Absent, nostalgia
withdraws like smoke.
Again, oblivion
opens its pure hands
to wash the names,
the landscapes,
the vegetable traces
and all the awful
armour of the present.
The iron of silence
has sealed the lips
with the taste of gun-powder
and only our dead
have bitten the earth
where thousands of times
they felt the soil
bloom under their feet.
Perhaps besides the shadow
hunger settles in
like the dove
under the bright eaves
and barely a murmur
shakes the leaf.
You need the running
water of rivers
and the whole bitter ocean
to clean the wound.
It’s necessary to lie down
as a lover of death,
as Neruda said,
speaking of other things,
to feel the broken
bones of your brother
and dig around in his chest
looking for his life.