



The Time of the Hero : A Revolutionary Novel by Mario Vargas Llosa

Monika S. Rana (Researcher)
School of Studies in English
Vikram University
Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, India

Abstract

Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian author, was born in Arequipa, attended Military academy and did his studies in literature and law. He is a Nobel laureate and his early fiction deals chiefly with the revolutionary themes. There is an interweaving of revolutionary themes with revolutionary techniques. He presents real places and real incidents and sometimes the real names of his characters in a most disjointed manner. The most outstanding of his revolutionary novels include *The Time of the Hero*, *The Green House*, *Conversation in the Cathedral*, *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, and *The War of the End of the World*. These works have revolutionized the whole Spanish speaking world making them appear as translations in many languages. After losing the presidential election in 1990 against Alberto Fujimori, he turned totally towards writing. Vargas Llosa's first work appeared in Spanish with the title *La ciudad y los perros*, and with its revolutionary effect on the Spanish speaking intellectuals, it was transformed to *The Time of the Hero* by its translator. The most significant aspect of this work is that everything round him has the quality of becoming subject matter of his fiction and he converts through his imagination the happenings of the world into his novels and essays. In fact, the Leoncio Prado Military Academy provided his fiction with food and water, a proper vent to his feelings and great popularity. The incidents narrated in *The Time of the Hero* revolve round the Academy, cadets, military officers and the city of Lima.

As a novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa opens his career with his Spanish *La ciudad y los perros* or *The Time of the Hero* as its English translation by Gregory Rabassa. This outstanding novel of his has a great impact on the society and particularly on the management of the Leoncio Prado Military Academy of Lima who burnt one thousand copies of the book as a gesture of condemnation of the book. This was done because the officials of the Academy took it as it was a plot to defame the reputation of the Academy. In fact, Llosa had stayed in the Academy for one year as per his father's wish so that he might develop his masculinity and vigour among the cadets and other officers. Thus, the poet heart collected and kept the reminiscences of the Academy and it was his opportunity that he gave the Academy the pivotal significance while he wrote *The Time of the Hero*.

The influence of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre is quite evident in the novel *The Time of the Hero*, not only by its

revolutionary zeal but also with its Part One in which begins with a quotation of Sartre as: "We play the part of heroes because we're cowards, the part of saints because we're wicked: we play the killer's role because we're dying to kill our fellow man: we play at being because we're liars from the moment we're born" (pt. 1).

The novel's original Spanish name being *La ciudad y los perros* means *The City and the Dogs*, signifies not only the miserable condition of the Academy, but also of the whole of Lima, the capital of Perú. Symbolically the dogs are the cadets or allegorically the public including the officers in the Academy and the people including the administration of Perú. The world of *The Time of the Hero* is the place where fair is foul and foul is fair it is expressed in the words of William Shakespeare, and moreover, there is a designed anarchy craving for masculinity and a macho status. There are brutalities, invalid and multiple sexual relationships, prostitution, love



affairs, broken families, corrupt officers etc. Every part of life and society is revolving, shuddering and struggling.

The only one character in the novel *The Time of the Hero*, breaking all myths and the settled norms of the Academy, bringing the message of revolution or rebellion is 'the Jaguar,' (3; pt.1, ch.1) who remains the Jaguar till the end of the novel proving all others to be the dogs, as the new comers were called by the senior cadets. The author very occasionally uses the original names of the characters in the Academy, rather the names representing their characters, as 'the Poet,' for Alberto Fernández, who used to write poems, songs, love letters and pornographic fiction to sell to his mates; 'the Slave' (4; pt.1, ch.1), for Ricardo Arana as he was very humble and obedient; and Porfirio Cava was added an adjective 'peasant' turning into peasant Cava because of his timidity (7; pt. 1, ch.1).

The unyielding Jaguar, after entering the Leoncio Prado Academy, refuses to surrender to the atrocities of the senior cadets in the name of initiation and turns rebellious. What the Jaguar finds is that his mates were treated as dogs by the senior cadets, and one of them was compelled in the following manner as: "They stripped," and forced "to lie down and 'swim' on his back around the soccer field. Later they took him into one of the barracks of the Fourth, where he made up a lot of bunks, sang and danced on a locker, imitated movie stars, polished many pairs of boots, cleaned a floor tile with his tongue, screwed a pillow, drank piss . . ." (46-47; pt.1, ch.2). This bullying was intolerable to the juniors and as Cava says, "the initiation lasts a whole month." After the depiction by who was accompanying the Jaguar and had seen his fight with more than twenty senior cadets defeating them all, the juniors decide to call upon the Jaguar for their security. This incident had already made the Jaguar rebellious and he chooses to fight against the cruelty and tyranny of the senior cadets who call them the dogs. All of them decide to "get revenge on the Fourth,"

and constitute a group which was named "the Circle" (49; pt.1, ch.2). Afterwards the Jaguar defeats the strongest of all the seniors establishing his authority and superiority as the Jaguar, unlike the dogs. Marcelo and Davis in their article "Secrecy: A Structural Concept of the Time of The Hero," appearing in the *World Literature Today*, appreciate the quality of Llosa on not revealing the real name of the character known as the Jaguar in the whole of the novel and this feature has been regarded as the stylistic triumph so far as the structure of the novel is concerned (Marcelo 68-70).

The members of "the Circle" decide that whosoever loses the game of dice, will steal the Chemistry paper from the school. This is another example of rebellion which is two-fold, on the one hand playing dice in the latrine, and on the other, plotting for sealing the examination. Porfirio Cava is now designated to perform the task, and which he accomplishes too, but leaves behind him a broken window pan as a proof. This is the central incident that makes the story advance and adds so many characters, actions and places to it. Most of the incidents prove to run against the settled order of either the society or the law. Further, the adolescence has been very clearly exposed after having probed the psychologically of the cadets with all its traits, longings and vices that develop in a residential school.

When nobody from the cadets came forward to confess the guilt of stealing, the officers of the Academy, declared a general confinement resulting in total cancellation of the weekly passes which were given to the cadets. The only condition was that until and unless the culprit is found at one's own instance, none of the cadets would be provided with the pass. It suffocated the desires of the Slave or Ricardo Arana, who was in love with Teresa and wanted to meet her. This was impossible as the sanctions on the weekly pass were in operation. Ricardo Arana or the Slave, having no guilt in the stealing of the paper, was so perplexed and



excited that he decided to expose the crime of Cava, the peasant, to the authorities.

As soon as the guilt of the peasant Cava was exposed, the officers of the Academy decided to rusticate Cava in a very insulting manner. In the presence of the whole battalion, one of the officers “ripped the insignias off his cap and his lapels, then the emblem off his breast pocket,” leaving “him in rags,” then “two soldiers got on either side of him and marched him away” (200; pt. 2, ch.1). This made the Jaguar furious for taking revenge on the Slave who was given the pass. This was a great cataclysm in the circumstances and the Jaguar swore to take revenge on the “squealer” (139; pt. 1, ch.6). This creates a shiver in the circle and the pattern of the revenge was unpredictable. Still, representing the spirit of rebellion, without any pre-plan, when the Slave stood just in front of the Jaguar, he shot the Slave with a bullet at the back of his head. Many investigations were made and everything was done both to find out the cause of his death and as well as to save the reputation of the Academy and finally the case was closed and filed with the comment describing the incident as an accident.

Alberto, the Poet was upset all the time because he liked the Slave who shared his personal matters with him. Being very sorry and sympathetic to the Slave and the only one to witness the fact, he decided to get the culprit punished. He tried his best to convince with all his arguments to lieutenant Gamboa about the incident, which sounded authentic to him as “the Jaguar killed him to get revenge for Cava” (265; pt. 2, ch.3). As per the narration and revelation of the Poet, lieutenant Gamboa, finding everything as told by the Poet, like cigarettes, liquor, porn stories, letters etc., in the Academy, prepares his investigation report and hands it over to the Captain. Meanwhile the other officers talked to Gamboa and indirectly advised him not to remain firm about his statements in the report, otherwise he might face adverse consequences so far as his due promotion is concerned. The matter was

further forwarded to Captain Garrido, who finally rejects all the claims of both Gamboa and Alberto as having no concrete proof but all concocted on the basis of the circumstances. The Captain favours the acts of the cadets by saying, “you learn in the army is to be a man. And what do men do? They smoke, they drink, they gamble, they fuck . . . But the smart ones don’t get caught. If they’re going to be men, they have to take chances, they have to use their wits. That’s the way the army is . . .”(286-287; pt. 2, ch.4). The Captain further pleads the act of the cadets being just, “because they’re men now” (287; pt. 2, ch.4). Thus the revolutionary zeal of a fair officer and a truthful cadet was suppressed for personal gains, selfishness and saving the reputation of the Leoncio Prado Academy. Probes, enquiry and all the formalities take place, as it was a matter of a student, the result was that the cadet died without leaving a proof and the official report concluding and justifying the death as an accident and not a murder and thereby throwing everything in a labyrinth of conjectures. The Academy freed itself, through its officers, of any untoward incident or defamation and raised its flag as it ever did. Hereby the chapter of the death of the Slave was closed by the Leoncio Prado Academy, and nothing remained for further investigation.

Meanwhile, the reader is given a detailed account of the Jaguar as having a background of being a brigand himself, right from his childhood and was the most hated one by his mother. But he gets admitted to the Academy by blackmailing his Godmother, with whom he had illicit relationship. The transfer of lieutenant Gamboa to the hillside for being right makes the Jaguar confess his crime to the lieutenant in writing but was overlooked by the lieutenant as he was relieved. This manly courage is rewarded and makes him marry his beloved Teresa and finally live a happy life with her afterwards.

As the novel advances or rather, the reader goes ahead through it, one begins to gather



a plethora of strands representing rebellion in its various form sat random, like driving a car which involves activities like following the traffic signals; listening to the radio; controlling the brake-clutch-accelerator; talking to the accompanying people; receiving calls and dialing the cell phone; pressing the horn when necessary; looking at the rear scene mirror; lighting the indicators; saying hello to the known people; drinking water from the bottle; and even whistling or singing along with any favourite songs. This way the author has very successfully revolutionized the form and structure of the novel.

The Academy is found to be a platform for the human tendency of going against the set norms of the society by the cadets just under the nose of the military officers who manage and control the affairs of the military school. There is no poetic justice, nor a hard-core villain, but the punch line may be that of the beginning of Shakespear's *Hamlet* wherein fair is foul and foul is fair. The novel also does not take its normal linier course, instead, the author functions as a reporter recording all the possible ebb and flow from all sides by visiting and revisiting the same site to find out the developments, making the work a chronicle. This has earlier been done by Gabriel García Márquez in his novella *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. The author moves both back and forth in time and the work seems to be a collage of various patches of paragraphs and chapters fixed without arrangement, but which are reconciled only in the end.

Thus, there is revolution not only in the substance of the story but also in the style and technique that are employed in the novel. A reader is required to arrange and rearrange the blocks in the form of paragraphs and chapters like a Jigsaw puzzle experiencing the Dadaism involved in the work to form a correct picture of the narrative.

Works Cited

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