

The Man Who Wanted to Write like Marquez Sunil Sharma

He was in love – with Gabriel Garcia Marquez.
Who is not?

‘I want to write like Marquez, my master,’ he would say often. Now everybody wants to write like him and get a cult following and possibly, a Nobel.

‘We too,’ we would say, sipping brown concoction they called tea in a run-down hotel off the corner street. The taste of sugar would linger for an hour. The good thing was the lazy owner – one-eyed survivor of a communal riot between the Hindus and Muslims – would never ask us to leave. So we would sit, chat and drink tea, lots of it in chipped cups hardly washed by a frail Nepali teen who served as both the cook and the waiter. He, too, suffered a minor disability – a limp that would get pronounced when agitated. Although students, we were a motley group of down-n-outs. It was a perfect place, the Taj Tea House as it was majestically called, although it consisted of a shack and a lean-to and few old chairs and wobbly tables. We called it Sanctuary. Ideal for drifters and there were plenty. Overall, it was a hospitable hideout for us and very cheap.

It was the kingdom of the dreamers!

So we sat, a bunch of college students and out-of-job young men, drinking sugary tea, eating thick-crust biscuits and discussing everything: the contours of a female body; the shape of craters on the moon, bawdy Baudelaire; failed love relationships; the unemployment rate and suicide of writers. Every topic was welcome. Nothing was taboo. We talked of things sublime; we talked shit! Some of the regulars among us were students of English Lit and felt very superior and privileged. We were heavily influenced by theory, criticism and literature. We talked of words that the rickshaw-pullers sitting opposite us would never understand. We talked of the French and German thinkers, and treated non-thinkers, non-philosophers, non-literary with utter contempt.

They were all barbarians!

We regarded ourselves as a special species – young, restless, small-town dreamers out to change the World through the Word. We were sure that we were meant for higher things. Each one of us was gifted and born for greatness! In fact, none among us ever liked the ordinary. We hated the provincial town; the pettiness of the commercial pattern of existence that characterised it; the mediocrity of life into which we were born by a cruel accident or blind fate. The core group consisted of few beginning writers, actors and directors. Arts were our sacred province and the everyday was for the others – the 9-5 folks doomed to die ordinary on this planet and contribute to its overcrowding through mindless breeding. We dreamed big and in the Eastman

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colours. In our small heads, each one of us carried large empires where we presided as sole emperors.

As artists, we sought a 70mm cinematic version of reality that was light years away from our dull routine in a squalid town, long neglected and then, eventually forgotten by the state. We operated on the periphery. We wanted quick exits from this monochromatic landscape into a multi-hued realm neither here nor there. In a region between reality and fantasy. There would be quick stardom for everyone in the group.

Recognition.
Wealth.
Screaming fans.
Immortality.

Born lower middle-class, our chances of upward mobility were thin. Salaried class could never ensure that hip lifestyle. That kind of blessed state we could never achieve in a lifetime of doing menial jobs, stuck in a dying town. The only exit for dreamers like us was film, theatre or literature. They could bring us success, power, money and universal recognition. And free us from anonymity forever.

Naturally, in this grim setting, talking of our favorite writers was a pastime. The great Marquez had become hot news. It had been a closed world in the early 1980s. Globalisation was yet to occur. His voice was like fresh wind blowing in a damp place! He made us see old things in a new way. Marquez had hypnotised the entire world through word.

He had, the stout Colombian, this seller of magic realism, debuted in our dingy town as well. The only shop selling books and magazines in the main market had brought two copies of *The Hundred Years of Solitude*, not sure of its reception. A seminar had been organised on the subject of Marquez, by the few English teachers with a college degree. I had borrowed his books from my teacher and found him impressive. He had challenged dominant modes of seeing and the reading realities of the largely Western literary world. A new continent, shimmering a long distance away, was made visible for those of us who were raised on the old MA (English) syllabus of Dickens-Hardy-Galsworthy in a stifling Indian classroom.

What a perceptive writer! We were in thrall. A superstar, the real one. *Could we be like him?*

‘You are not listening...’ he protested, interrupting a random train of thought.

‘I am listening,’ I insisted.

‘What did I say?’ he asked.

I smiled. ‘That you want to write like Marquez. You, my friend Ramesh Kumar, a resident of Ghaziabad, wants to be another Marquez. An Indian Marquez.’

Ramesh smiled. His eyes held that dreamy look – gazing into space ahead, trying to figure out things dim on a distant horizon. Of all our friends, loosely held together by a literary bond, he was the most arrogant – or foolish. For some, he was both. For his frustrated parents, he was a fool of first order. Only his widowed sister believed in his genius. Rest of the family did what humans are best at doing – making fun behind his back and to his face, praising him to the skies.

‘Next Shakespeare!’ we would declare to him, while secretly winking at each other. ‘What you write, even Shakespeare will not understand!’ And he would go pink

in the face. Then we would ask for a treat. He always obliged. We told him what he wanted to hear. He firmly believed that the next century belonged to him only. One day he would be as famous as the Colombian; he had promised this repeatedly. This trait sometimes irritated me.

‘Yes. I want to write like him. Yaar, Marquez is the best. What magic he creates! I want to write like him only.’

‘All the world wants to do that,’ I said, trying to hide my anger at his insolence. Suddenly, one day, his overbearing tone and narcissism repelled me. I felt annoyed with him and the world that stood static on that hot afternoon.

‘Let them. I am different. I am not the world. Your hoi polloi. I am special.’

And he dragged on his cigarette and then coughed. His tall body draped in a brown Kurta and blue jeans shook with the raking cough that dislodged the bifocals on his hooked nose and lent a pathetic look to his bearded face. The darting eyes got magnified from behind the specks dangling on the tip of a wide nose. He appeared ridiculous.

‘OK. Then DO write like Marquez,’ I snapped, lighting up my third cigarette. A warm wind was blowing from across the dusty plain, coating the tables and chairs with a fine layer of dust. The shack was deserted due to unbearable May-end heat. The one-eyed owner was sleeping on his barebacked chair, mouth open, a fat fly buzzing over his protruding teeth. The famished Nepali was swatting the mosquitoes with bare hands, an enterprise not suited to him. The flying mosquitoes always won and a few trophies were fast replaced by another angry army that bred and multiplied in a nearby choked open drain. The stench was awful to the first-time visitors. We had gotten immune to the stench, garbage and mosquitoes. It was hell.

‘Why you irritated?’ he demanded, eyes cold, a smirk on his hungry face. A master offended.

I said nothing. Sort of clammed up inside. I often do. Out of humour, I go deep inside. Withdraw incrementally from the immediate scene into a depthless void inside. A dark hole that we urban residents carry with us everywhere. I sat silent and smouldered. There were many things to be angry at. Everything was a mess.

Outside the shack, a humming sound could be heard on the bending highway in the distance. It was like a scorched serpent slowly uncoiling its black body. The ennui was overwhelming. We sat and stared, registering nothing. The sun poured lava on the burnt ground on which the hotel stood as an oasis under a slim Margo tree. Thatched and mud-walled. We two often sat here for hours as we had no place to go. Home was not very welcoming.

‘Why you irritated?’ he repeated.

I did not take the bait.

Even the town was dead. He was also not expecting any answer. We sat and stared. Two lost souls. The street was dead.

He inhaled lustily on his fifth cigarette, swirled the smoke in his mouth, exhaling the grey cloud like an acrobat doing a slow act. ‘Have you read ‘One of These Days’?’

‘What is that?’

‘A classic short story by Marquez.’

‘No?’

‘You must. A gem...glittering gem. Vintage Marquez,’ he droned, like a bored

lecturer, repeating the same idea to a class of equally bored listeners.

‘I can re-write it. The same story.’

‘Who is stopping you? Go ahead.’

‘This story is as much about Columbia as it is about India.’ He gushed, indifferent to my tone. ‘It is a mini masterpiece. It needs to be written in the Indian context.’

‘So do it, instead of telling me.’ I retorted.

‘You are my close friend. That is why I am telling you,’ he said, serene.

‘How will you re-write a classic by a master?’ I asked.

‘I will change the names and re-write the whole story. It consists of only 994 words. Very small.’

‘That will be plagiarism!’

‘Naw. It is called re-writing.’

‘Then?’

‘I will get *noticed* through this reprise.’

‘You were to write like Marquez?’

He smiled, finished the tea and sighed, ‘You are impossible! Ordinary souls do not understand a genius like me.’

I wanted to scream.

‘One day, I will own the whole world.’

I did not contradict him. It was futile.

He was quiet for some time. Then he looked directly at me across the sun mica-topped table full of faded stains and smiled sweetly: ‘OK. I meant I will be re-writing Marquez.’

‘No. You said you wanted to write like him,’ I insisted. The old fan whirred above us unable to dispel the oppressive heat. A blinding glare outside hurt the eyes. It was a bleak day.

‘OK. I will write the story in an Indian context.’

‘How can it be possible?’

‘We share the same fate. Same deprivation. Same cruel inequities...’

‘Then write about them. Why reprise a story that deals with a Colombian situation of the 60s?’

He looked stumped.

‘Why? To mimic a great writer? Why not find your own voice, however small?’ I asked, persisting in my little advantage, pushing the knife deeper.

‘I am learning. From a master. We echo our fav writers,’ he said, not very sure.

‘Sure. Echo them. But don’t mimic them,’ I continued to harangue.

He grew grim, ‘Why do you talk like a teacher? Always pontificating?’

‘No. I am talking as an honest reader. Why ape somebody else when we are not that somebody?’ I explained.

He pondered. ‘Ok. Are we not influenced by role-models?’

I nodded. ‘Yes. But it is temporary. We cannot become what we are not.’

‘Then what do you mean? I am nobody?’ His voice rose, to almost screeching. His darting eyes jumped out of the sockets in anger.

‘One thing is sure. You are NOT Marquez,’ I pronounced with the finality of a presiding judge.

He laughed maniacally. 'Wrong! Absolutely wrong! You are jealous. Insecure! I will prove my genius. I will show I can write like Marquez. Yes...I will prove it...' His hands began shaking. I thought he had gone crazy. Or become delusional!

And then brutal reality intervened in this piece of conversation with a sudden shock of 2000watts.

A huge commotion broke outside the shack that diverted our attention. We stopped sparring.

A man could be heard screaming, 'Help me. Somebody save me. They will kill me. Please...save me.'

The dozing teashop owner, the Nepali helper and two of us sprang out of the shack as a single party and saw a horrible scene unfolding a few metres away in the open. A reed-thin man in a torn t-shirt and half-shorts was being hit repeatedly by two burly cops near a stationary rickshaw. Blood trickled out of his thin mouth. They were kicking him and abusing him, had gone berserk, on that baked ground. The screaming man was terrified, his eyes bulging out.

'What is going on here,' demanded the one-eyed owner in a commanding voice that surprised us. 'STOP!' The effect was dramatic. The cops stopped hitting the man who immediately collapsed on the ground, writhing in mortal pain, vomiting blood. 'Why are you hitting a poor man? Are you cops or thugs?' He demanded, his voice croaking with deep disgust and anger. In an instant, this non-entity had turned into a hero taking on the establishment, almost barehanded.

The abrupt intrusion of civilians disoriented the cops. They glowered, unable to decide their next course of action, taken aback by this puny challenger.

The victim sat up with effort on the burning ground, blood dripping on his dirty t-shirt, hands folded, 'Sir, they hired my rickshaw. I drove them around in the strong heat for an hour and when I asked for money, they began slapping and punching me hard in the belly. I am a dirt poor man. Cannot I ask them for payment?'

'Yes. You can. Then?' he demanded, in control.

'The cops told me they are the government. How can I ask money from the government?' He was finding it difficult to speak. After some seconds, the rickshaw-puller continued slowly: 'When I said that I have a large family to feed, they began hitting me, first with light blows and then they punched and slapped me. Please save me from these devils.' And he started crying, a picture of abject surrender and helplessness.

My blood boiled at this blatant violence and abuse. I looked hard at the arrogant men in khaki. They remained unfazed. Rather they bristled with rage. It was brazen power on display!

One of the cops stood unsteady. He was heavily drunk. Sickening. The other cop recovered quickly and barked, 'Go away, you s-s-scum. It is police work. Do not interfere. Go aw-y.' He was more bulky, eyes red, voice slurring.

The one-eyed guy shouted, 'I am not a scum. You are. I will report this to the inspector.'

The duo laughed. 'You? One-eyed scum. You will report us to the inspector?'

The small saviour replied firmly, 'Yes. I will. He sometimes drops in at my

place for tea. He knows me well.'

'Ok. Then we break your both legs and bust your only good eye as well. Make you lame and blind. A permanent cripple! Ha! Stopping a policeman on duty? I will make you beg for mercy, you ugly monster. Bust your eye and legs, you know. Then you go and report to inspector, crawling on your belly,' the bulky one said and he started marching towards us with his cane swishing in the air. The other one lit a cigarette and waited for the action to start. It was apparent that the two were sadists sans conscience. This episode, unscripted, was eerie and unsettling. Two drunken cops ready to kill witnesses in a few lingering minutes in that vast wasteland.

My stomach turned to jelly. I had never experienced such an overwhelming sense of dread. The rogue cops were thrilled like hounds by the scent of blood. The lip of the armed cop began twitching. His face had a look of madness. He was beyond sanity. The service revolver gave him a sense of untrammelled power over us. I could sense approaching death.

But the tea-house owner stood his ground, showing no fear. The man had turned into a statue, eyes un-blinking. 'Hit me, if you dare.' He said, almost taunting. His calmness infuriated the uniformed men further.

The cop laughed. Beyond reason. He expertly swished the polished cane in his thick hairy hand, while his colleague took out his revolver, eyes glinting hard. The situation could turn fatal. A murder could occur in few minutes.

'Do not do it,' I heard my loud voice urging an unlikely truce. The shrillness of this pleading tone surprised me. I never intended to speak out but somehow got dragged into a dangerous scene, first as an unintentional witness and then as an unwilling participant.

The glaring cops turned, re-focused and two pairs of ruthless eyes clamped me. Their icy coldness curdled my blood. The eyes of hardened killers! I was reminded of a striking cobra. The one with revolver aimed at my heart and coolly said, 'who are you? Ordering us about like the superintendent of police. You, a scumbag! I will kill you first and write it up as an encounter with a known hoodlum. You...'. And a string of abuses followed in Hindi. The other with the cane started towards me, relishing each measured step that took him towards his intended prey; a serial killer in a classic stalking mode.

I stood rooted to the spot. Waiting for that fatal shot. For my own imminent death in that urban wilderness, near the derelict shack that had served as a day-home and a sanctuary for long.

Then something un-imagined happened. Breaking out of the general paralysis, the one-eyed owner swung a log towards the advancing cop that dislodged the cane from his hand and temporarily confused him. It was the practiced throw of a man who was once a knife-thrower in a travelling caravan. It opened up a tiny window of salvation. The brave teashop owner shouted at us: 'Run. Run for your life, boys. They are cold-blooded killers. They will kill you both. RUN.'

Galvanised by this abrupt call from a brave well-wisher, coming out of a trance, immediately, raw fear surging as a tidal wave inside, without thinking, we ran for our precious lives. We synchronised as a team, and sprinted, galloped, leapt over garbage heaps, dirty puddles, open drains and prickly hedges, as if fleeing from a large enemy army, without catching breath or even looking back. As we hit the distant highway, panting, a shot boomed out, shattering the stillness of that scary summer

afternoon...

All this came back as a recollection on Thursday, April 17, 2014, the day the master died at the age of 87 in his home in Mexico City. That summer afternoon has been seared into my memory. That ill-fated encounter with feudal law in a small north Indian town in the early 1980s changed our lives forever. The shot that rang out still echoes in my ears on lonely nights. The scene plays out in nightmares for me.

We no longer remained the same and took separate ways. I returned home in the evening and told Ma about the whole thing. She asked me to leave for my maternal uncle's place some five hundred km away. Ramesh, I later on learnt, also went to a relative's house in a different city. We never knew who took that fatal shot that afternoon – it was not the age of 24x7 TV.

A few days later, two constables came searching for us. Somehow, the matter was resolved by a friend of my father, who worked in the office of the superintendent of police (SP). The constables had threatened to frame us in a murder case but dropped the idea after the SP intervened in the case. My father advised me to stay at my uncle's place and finish my studies there. I did that, terrified of the police in my own city and fearful of running into those murderous cops in a public place. I did not want to take any chance with law. I finished my studies, stayed on and then took a job in a leading English-medium school in Bikaner, Rajasthan and moved home. Ramesh too lost contact with me and we forgot each other.

Then, one evening, some 30 years later, during a rare visit to my native place, necessitated by the fast-deteriorating condition of father, I ran into Ramesh. It was another encounter planned by destiny. I can still remember that scene. After buying groceries and medicines, I took a turn into a narrow lane in the old city and found a corpulent man approaching from the opposite direction. It was a summer evening. Hot and oppressive. The temple bells were chiming in the small Hanuman temple a few yards away. Darkness was thickening. Birds talked on a huge banyan tree that grew in a nook of the twisting cobbled lane. Doors stood ajar in ancient homes of two-three stories, almost leaning on top of each other. A lone cyclist pedalled furiously past me. And two elderly men sat outside their homes, chatting and listlessly watching the thin traffic. The scene evoked melancholy in me. The kind of intimacy you feel for your lane and neighbourhood. Its old world charm lost forever, like those of many others, in newly built localities on the edge of decaying towns. But still notorious for violence and a high crime rate, for crumbling infrastructure.

'Eliot.' A loud voice boomed in the stillness of the lane and repeated, 'T.S.Eliot.'

I stopped dead in my tracks. Only one man called me Eliot in a derisive sense. Then it clicked as the obese man came up to me. A ghost from a long-buried past stood smiling before me. 'Ramesh?' I shouted with joy.

'Yes. Ramesh,' he said.

We hugged. Two lost brothers re-united.

'How are you the great Eliot?' he said. We both stood aside and exchanged memories.

'You still writing? We had great hopes from you. Always quoting the great T.S. Eliot. Ha ha ha,' he roared. 'Always wrote like the great Eliot. Using difficult words, myths, memories and odd Sanskrit words. We thought Eliot had re-incarnated

in India...in you.'

I, too, smiled, flattered by the comparison and then said, 'that was a different phase. We all were imitating either the British or American writers. That is over. Realty has claimed us all. I am cured. What about you? Did you write like great Marquez?'

He grew serious. 'No, yaar! I left writing decades ago. No regrets either. I too was cured.'

'Like me. Good! Happy to be a 9-to-5 guy. A regular guy with family and steady job. A member of the bourgeoisie. The pretensions are gone. You cannot escape your grim reality.' He was quiet for few seconds. Then: 'The moment was profound...like Eliot. Life for me changed that summer afternoon...as it did for you. I too ran away, finished my studies. Shaken by the incident that almost took our lives, I decided to apply for a government job. I studied hard and passed an exam to be a sub-inspector. These days, I am posted here only as a senior inspector. Enjoying my work.'

My jaw dropped. Marquez as police inspector!

'Surprised! Ha. That is life; full of surprises and neat twists! I wanted to become powerful, instead of writing about power. That day we survived. I understood in order to survive in this feudal country, you have to be powerful. Now, nobody can touch me ever. I am power personified.'

I was shocked. The man was indeed a ghost!

'Do visit me in the police station and see my kingdom. I am a terror in the city.' He laughed and hugged me again, the king of all he surveyed. 'Lot of money and prestige. I am rolling in wealth. Stashed away and invested in properties. My sons are doing well.'

'You have grown beyond recognition,' I commented.

'Yes. Lot of weight. You are same. Tall and thin,' he said good-humouredly. 'Booze, women and wealth, my dear Eliot. They can revive even a corpse. I am leading a life of pleasure only. Partying and all that. A different world!'

'What about Marquez?' I asked.

'Who is Marquez?' he asked, winked, pressed my hand in his fat he left me standing in that dark lane, pondering his question.

Was the early Ramesh real?

Or, this one?

Was that phase magical?

Or, this one?

Only Marquez could have shed light on this strange phenomenon but he was now talking with the greatest magician of the entire cosmos – his and our Maker up there in the clouds, about the merits and de-merits of a way of seeing called magic realism...