

Missing Person

Author: Patrick Modiano

Reviewed by Shibli Jabir

Patrick Modiano is not a popular household name, anywhere not even in the Anglophone academic and literary world. I will admit that I was not quite familiar with his work either when I heard last October that he had won the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2014. Modiano is the 16th French writer to be awarded this prize, giving France the distinction of being the country with the largest number of Nobel Laureates in Literature since the awards began in 1900. One factor contributing to his relative obscurity is, only eight of his twenty eight novels have been translated into English. However, as I later discovered, Modiano is very popular in Europe, particularly among "New Wave" intellectual circles. So I started researching his work, and found a list of his "must read" books, and at the top was "Missing Person" which also happens to be his most known.

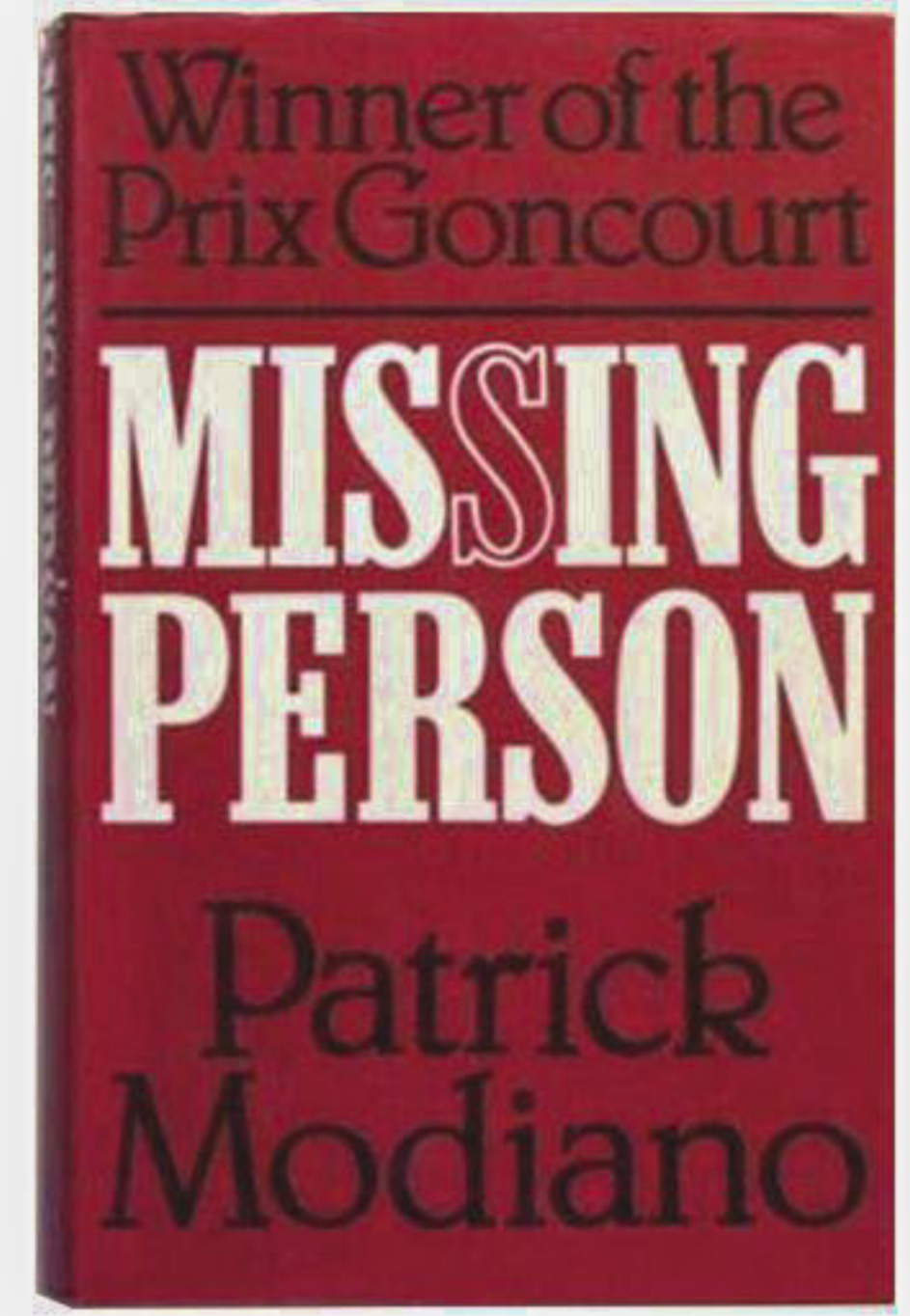
A common theme in Modiano's work is the loss of memory, the loss of self, and discovery of our identities. In awarding the award to Modiano, the Nobel committee cited his work for "the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life world of the Occupation". His father was Jewish and lived in Paris during the German Occupation, and we see the effect of these circumstances in this novel: Paris during Occupation, collaboration with the Germans, abandonment, solitude, and lack of roots.

The novel starts with the writer proclaiming, very boldly, "I am nothing." Thus begins his quest to find his identity and his former self which until now, for ten years, has remained hidden to him. What we know is that he is a private investigator and goes by the name Guy Roland. What triggers his new-found enthusiasm to research his past, and his journey to gather, and piece together, pieces of information that might take him back to his childhood and youth is the retirement of his mentor-cum-boss at the private investigation agency. His boss, Hutte, meets him for the last time before he returns to Nice to lead a life of retirement after passing on the baton to him. So the once-oblivious detective goes about on a mission to find the person he formerly was and morphed into the present day Guy Roland. Using fragmentary evidence and the skills acquired as a detective: photographs, scraps of paper, old newspapers, and directories in the agency.

Nonetheless, these offer very few solid leads. But he keeps on searching and on his mind are questions that we might all relate to: "Could he really be that person in a photograph, a young man remembered by some as a South American attaché? Or was the someone else, perhaps the disappeared scion of a prominent local family? He interviews strangers and is tantalized by half-clues

until, at last, he grasps a thread that leads him through the maze of his own repressed experience."

Modiano, a French national who was born in 1945 published this book, his sixth novel, in 1978 as *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* when he was only 32 years old, and captures the mood of the post-War Paris, where the ghost of Occupation and Vichy collaborators still haunted the survivors. We learn that Guy Roland lost his identity during the War, due to amnesia, and attempts to find out who he really was by working methodically using techniques he learned by working for the detective agency. His mentor, recently retired boss, C.M. Hutte, gave him a new name, a job and his current self. But he is bothered by the lack of any information about his childhood, youth, and his family. From archival photographs and interviews with individuals he comes across through his investigations



he attempts to reconstruct the events before his loss of memory.

The book, translated from the French by Daniel Weissbort, has some interesting features. Modiano is not a man of many words, but he is able to convey to the reader the sense of loss and the risk that Guy bears as he searches and goes from one clue to the next. Some of his "chapters" are short and cryptic. For example, Chapter 19 has the following only: "Mr. Jean-Michel. 1, Rue Gabrielle, XVIII. CLI 7201." End of chapter. For the confused reader allow me to parse this chapter. It has the name of a possible contact for the investigation, Mr. Jean-Michel who lives on Rue Gabrielle on the 18th Arrondissement in Paris. Finally the phone number.

Only one curious aspect of this novel. It ends with Guy following some broken leads

and then finally undertaking a trip to Polynesia. The Polynesian Islands appear to have a fascinating lure for French artists and writers since the time Paul Gauguin went there in the 19th century and left us with some memorable pieces of paintings. Guy is looking for a man named Freddie, and when he lands on the island of Tahiti he finds that Freddie has gone to a nearby island but his boat, a schooner, had washed up on the shores of Papete. At this juncture, Guy resolves to find him since he believes that Freddie is still alive and just hiding out on an atoll.

Modiano leaves us with an Existentialist dilemma and question at the end. Guy had carried a photograph of a girl named Gay Orlov with the intention of showing it to Freddie on reaching Tahiti. When he discovered that Freddie was missing, he looks at the photo of Gay once again and notices she was crying. The tears in a little girl's eye in a photograph taken many years ago brings in him a feeling of emptiness and maybe a yearning for his lost days. And Modiano asks, "Do not our lives dissolve into the evening as quickly as this grief of childhood?"

The book will resonate with people, both young and old, who find themselves lost, either because they were adopted at childhood and are trying to find their birth parents, had some memory loss or some other traumatic experience, or just having a mid-life crisis and trying to find where their roots are. In today's environment, the above is not such an unrealistic scenario since the popularity of genealogy tools and DNA tests have allowed migrants and children who never knew their parents to track down lost family and ancestors.

So, finally, what is remarkable about "Missing Person"? It is very short but complete, and the vocabulary is sparse. It employs a narrative style that might be called "phantasmagorical", meaning a random series of events or figures in a fantasy or dream like state. Imagine a scenario where you went to India during the War of Liberation in 1971. During the journey, which was very arduous and caused you tremendous hardship, you had a traumatic experience and lost your memory. You returned to Bangladesh after Liberation, and following a chance encounter with a generous person, you received a new identity and found work in the post-Liberation Dhaka. But after a few years, you wanted to find out who you were before the War and started from a scratch. Writing a book about searching one's roots can be easily done in a voluminous novel. But try doing so within 50,000 words. And you probably get to appreciate why this novel has generated such interest after Modiano received the Nobel.

The reviewer is frequent contributor to this page.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN BANGLADESH

Past, Present and Future

Edited by Imtiaz Ahmed

(The University Press Limited, 2014)

Reviewed by Shahid Alam

Perspectives on a critical human issue

HUMAN Rights in Bangladesh: Past, Present and Futures, edited by Imtiaz Ahmed, comes out with the stated intention of presenting the past, present and future of a key human issue in Bangladesh. In the event, it dwells on the past primarily on the history of the country from the time of Atish Dipankar to the end of the British raj where the issue of human rights is woven into the accounts of its rulers, and occasionally has to be read between the lines; more openly and extensively in the present, beginning with the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent nation-state; and prognosticating the future in an uncertain fashion. The book is structured along those three segments, with twelve chapters, written by twelve different authors, and an Introduction making up the whole. The editor has contributed the Introduction and the concluding chapter.

The Introduction is one of the better written pieces, which ends up summarizing and briefly commenting on the rest of the book. Ahmed contends with supportive explanation that, "Rights and duties, while applicable universally must not be applied uniformly." Taken prima facie, this statement is subject to interpretation and debate, but several of the chapters, taken together, support its validity. The author, however, unnecessarily belabours another maxim that he formulates this way: "...past, present and futures are all intermingled. The struggle for human rights otherwise cannot be limited to a particular time or age." Ahmed also points out a problem with the English and Bangla versions of Bangladesh's Constitution that has led to the familiar controversy (really a political one) regarding secularism. It has been stipulated by the Jatiyo Sangsad that, should any discrepancy arise over the two versions, then the Bangla version will prevail. While the English version uses the word "secularism", the Bangla rendering of the term is 'dharma-niropekhhota', which has left the door open for some to characterize it as being 'anti-religious' (read: anti-Islam). The author suggests that 'o-shamprodayikota' would have been closer to the meaning and spirit of secularism and, thus, have skirted the vexing and unnecessary controversy surrounding the term.

Syed Anwar Husain (Ch.1, "Human Rights in Bengal: Atish Dipankar to Sufis") meticulously explores the period of the study and, both explicitly and through sub-textual indications, ponders on human rights that were "totally dependent on the particular political philosophies of the ruler of the day." And, attesting to a laudable attribute of the Bengalis, he does not fail to point

out that, "The people of Bengal...have preferred syncretic versions of their preferred religions, be it Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam," and credits the modus operandi of the Sufis for nudging the Muslims towards the syncretic philosophy. M. Akhtaruzzaman (Ch. 2, "Akbar: Bengal and the Rights of the Subjects") has written on the overall reign of one of history's great rulers, Akbar, but intersperses with comments on his enviable human rights record. As he remarks, "Bengal then grew as a cosmopolitan secular society where people of different creeds and faiths could exercise their respective religio-philosophical rites and practices. Rights of women in relation to their right to property, justice and security were well protected compared to many societies at the time."

Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman (Ch.3, "Aurangzeb, Intolerance and other Misunderstandings"), while contesting a popular misconception comparing "Akbar's 'anti-Islamic' tolerance with his great-grandson Aurangzeb's 'pro-Islamic' intolerance," holds, with justification, that the last Great Mughal's place in history has often been misinterpreted. Part I is rounded off with Iftekhar Iqbal's "Colonial Contribution to Human Rights: Progressive or Regressive?" (Ch.4). As the title indicates, it deals with the British raj and takes a critical view of its human rights record in India, in spite of having introduced some notable edicts and regulations promoting human rights. Significantly, "the British rule...also influenced many ideas and practices of human rights in postcolonial times." In this context, he alludes to eighty one arbitrary shooting deaths of Indians at the hands of the Europeans as being reminiscent of "cross fire" incidents of the present day.

Part II deals with the present. Hameeda Hossain (Ch.5, "Human Rights in the Nation State") is a deeply reflective article exploring a whole gamut of issues on human rights in the context of the nation-state. On a broad philosophical level she states: "Narrow interpretations of notions of democracy, secularism and nationalism...have led to deviations from the original concept of the state." One of the consequences, according to her, as applied to Bangladesh, has been the government's refusal to recognize the indigenous

peoples inhabiting the country as being so. She believes that the practice on the ground of the advocates of human rights and access to justice "has often been constrained by powerful interest groups both within the state hierarchy and in the community." Ali Riaz (Ch. 6, "Electoral Democracy and Human Rights in Bangladesh") purports to "examine the causes of the poor human rights records of elected civilian regimes in Bangladesh." He attributes what he calls the "rampant human rights violation" to "a deep-seated political problem: the crisis of hegemony of the political elites in Bangladesh." He argues, citing data and other supportive materials, that "in the absence of hegemony, the political elite have resorted to coercion and seek to remain unaccountable."

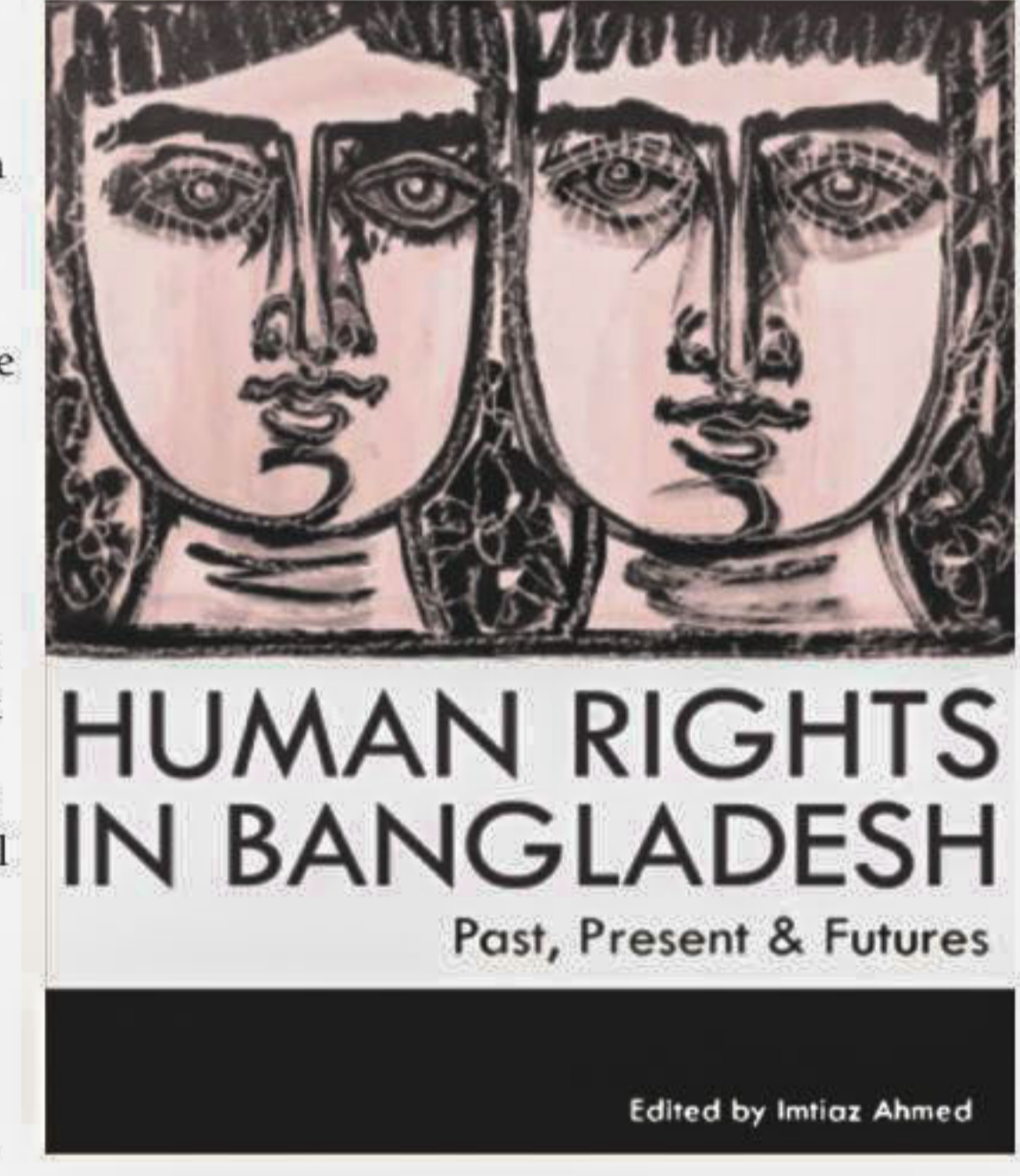
A.S.M. Ali Ashraf (Ch.7, "Extrajudicial Killings and Human Rights") takes up a contentious issue of the present day, extrajudicial killings. It is being hotly debated by jurists, human rights advocates and activists, and political figures from both Bangladesh and other countries. This is a theory and practice that, I am afraid, will not be resolved so easily or anytime soon. One piece of Ashraf's observation, nonetheless, deserves pondering over, even though the country has been enjoying a twenty four-year near unbroken stretch of parliamentary democracy, and should not be burdened with another bout of military/quasi-military rule. It really draws attention to the abysmal state of political culture in the country: "It is an irony that the deployment of armed forces is often desired by the mass people, when the civilian government fails to control petty and organized crime, terrorism and political violence, and natural disasters. The presence of the military is also welcomed in holding free and fair elections." M.M. Akash (Ch.8, "Rights Based Approach to Development and Right to Land") argues for establishing different types of land rights as basic human rights. He is particularly concerned about protecting the rights of the land poor in this country. His chapter rounds off the present.

Syed Jamil Ahmed (Ch.9, "Refusing the Doctrine of Human Rights: Retrieving Signs of 'Plurality of Resistance'") starts off Part III (Futures). He uses the allegory of the play Manik Piner Geet to illustrate aspects of human rights. That might be stretching the exercise a bit much to make a point, but it is an interesting way to make it. However, as in a few other articles in the anthology, the author resorts unnecessarily to

some post-modern writers to (presumably) provide an intellectual oomph to his piece. For example, the "three actors (in Manik Piner Geet) struggle against each other in, as Foucault would say, 'a war continued by other means'" really does not give any additional weightage to the sentence. And, by the way, for long diplomacy has been characterized as being a war conducted by other means. Amena Mohsin (Ch. 10, "Rooting Women's Rights as Humane Rights") wonders "where do women stand...in the entire matrix of human rights", and proceeds to try answer her own mental query.

Saima Ahmed (Ch.11, "Rethinking Human Rights Education"), in an otherwise sketchy piece, pertinently draws on the observations of Makau Mutua regarding the bias of Western countries vis-à-vis the non-Western ones regarding perspectives on, and practice of, human rights. "The construction of the human rights discourse and its key documents including those of the United Nations" are written by the Western states, international non-governmental organizations, and senior Western academics. The non-Western countries are absolutely invisible or marginalized in the drafting which...has made the nobility and majesty of the human rights values a contradiction in itself." Imtiaz Ahmed (Ch.12, "Managing Diversity in a Dystopian World: Can Post-national Politics Make a Difference?") concludes with some thoughts on the rise of intolerance in the name of Islam in Bangladesh. He notices that, "Never in the history of Islamic civilization did we find the Salafi or Wahhabi creed making an impact to the level it has done in recent times." He believes that the windfall from the skyrocketing of crude oil price in the 1970s and beyond (although it has come down in 2015) has allowed the Saudi Arabians to proselytize the Saudi strain of Wahhabi Islam. "Bangladesh, being a non-Wahhabi area and at the same time immensely impoverished, both materially and intellectually, became an easy target of the creed." Establishing even the human rights generally agreed upon by all societies certainly faces formidable challenges.

The reviewer is an actor and educationist.



The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Author: Philip Swanson

Reviewed by Mahfuz ul Hasib Chowdhury

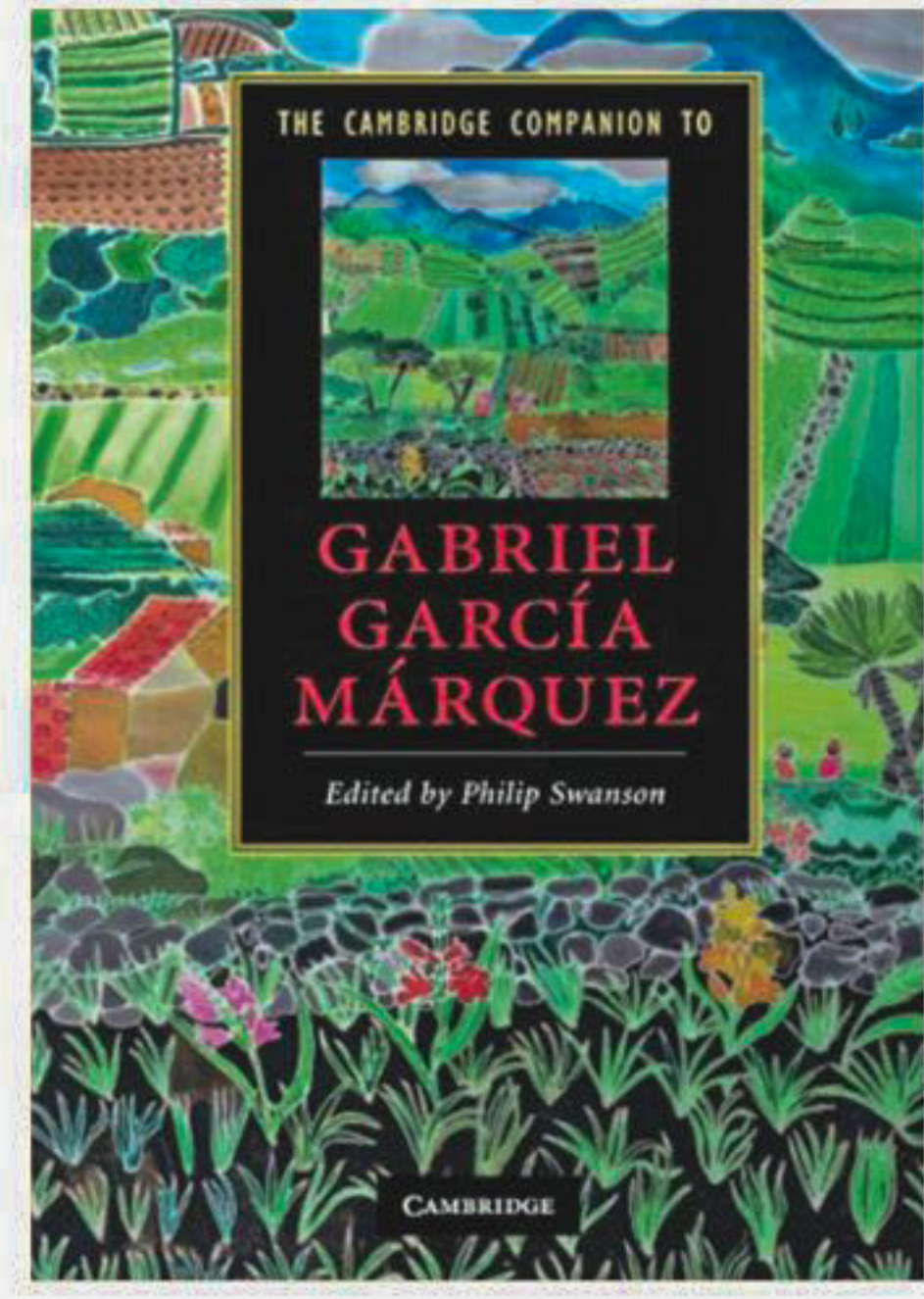
The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel Garcia Marquez by Philip Swanson is an analytical book containing essays by eminent literary scholars on the fictional works of Garcia Marquez. Penetrative essays by Donald Shaw, Robin Fiddian, Steven Boldy, Raymond Williams, Claire Taylor and Gerald Martin have made this book a highly educative text for students and pedagogues scrutinizing the stories of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

GABRIEL Garcia Marquez (1927-2014), one of the most vital Colombian authors, hardly needs to be introduced. His masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude* illuminated him with fame right after its publication in 1967. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is viewed as one of the greatest literary works of all centuries and all disquisitions on Latin American literature remain incomplete without citing this novel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* established Gabriel Garcia Marquez as an outstanding author of the world and it ornamented him with Nobel Prize for literature in 1982. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an indispensable book for a deeper look into the rise of civilization in South America and humans' settlement across the Caribbean Islands. Moreover, this novel movingly deals with the horrors of civil wars in some parts of Latin America, the exploitation of native Colombian people by foreign companies and a passionate love story and all these things are found proceeding through seven generations of the Buendia family in a fictional town called Macondo.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez was a superb artist of magic realism in fictional works, particularly in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Magic realism refers to a narrative technicality in literature in which miraculous or paranormal events are portrayed like ordinary day-to-day phenomena while it depicts mundane incidents like supernatural fantasies. The term "magic realism" was first introduced by German art scholar Franz Roh in 1925.

According to the essays compiled in this book, solitude is a recurrent motif in most of the stories by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is located in the remote jungles of Colombian rainforest, far away from the rest of the world. People living inside that far-off village are hardly recognized or noted by the rest of the globe, as the novel shows. Similarly, in *No One Writes to the Colonel*, another best-

known book by Garcia Marquez, we find a former colonel of Colombian army leading a very solitary life with his sick wife. The colonel was a valorous military officer during his years in combat uniform and he set a good number of heroic examples on the battlefield for his country. But after retirement he and



his wife are left in deep monetary shortage. The colonel waits years after years for his pension, a healthy amount of money the government had promised him, which doesn't arrive. He domesticates a rooster which he intends to put in a cockfight contest of his village with the hope that if the rooster wins it can get some money for its master. The colonel waits for the postman everyday but he never turns out to be lucky enough to receive any good message from the government. *No One Writes to the Colonel* tells the story of the dreams we believe in, the hopes

we count on and how deeply it hurts when those dreams and hopes end up like a wild goose chase and turn into useless fancies.

In *Innocent Erendira*, a highly acclaimed short story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, readers get introduced to a beautiful girl who goes through unspeakable hardships under her ruthless and immoral grandmother's disposal. Her grandmother forces her to give sexual pleasure to people to earn money. The sufferings and tribulations of Erendira touch the hearts of all readers. The story closes with Erendira picking up enough guts to stab her grandmother one night and running away with a man who had come to have sex with Erendira but instead falls in love with her and motivates her to escape with him from her vicious grandmother's house. Love taught Erendira to fight back and love has the charisma to become a lethal weapon anytime to instigate people to strike back at repression, this story suggests.

Love in the Time of Cholera, *Leaf Storm*, *Memoirs of My Melancholy Whores*, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* are some other esteemed novels by Gabriel Garcia Marquez while *Living to Tell the Tale* is his autobiography.

The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel Garcia Marquez addresses another narrative strategy implemented by Garcia Marquez—metafiction. Metafiction stands for synthesizing fictional components with non-fictional disciplines like history, anthropology and geography. Gabriel Garcia Marquez exercised metafiction in some of his novels including *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Most of the books by Gabriel Garcia Marquez were translated into English by veteran translators like Gregory Rabassa and Edith Grossman who were able to retain the original appeal of Garcia Marquez's tales while converting the books from Spanish into English language.

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