

THE CENTRALIZATION OF THE PROTEST AND FAILURE OF MARGINALIZED INDIVIDUALS IN MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S *CONVERSATION IN THE CATHEDRAL*

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Abstract

Mario Vargas Llosa is one of the prominent writers of Latin American Boom. His third novel Conversation in Cathedral published in 1969 is based on a historical, political event-oppressive regime of the dictator Manuel Odria during 1948 to 1956 and Llosa's personal experiences. The novel deals with the corruption, repression prevalent in every sphere of life during the dictatorship. It depicts how the unjust system touched and affected almost everyone in the country. Llosa presents us the events through the conversations of many characters, main of which is the conversation between Santiago Zavala, the son of a rich businessman, politician and Ambrosio, his father's chauffeur. Though the frustrated, failed protest of the protagonist Santiago against his father and the 'system' is at the central place of the novel, we also find the same events affecting many other insignificant and marginalized individuals in the novel. They belong to poor, lower class and that is why they are ineffectual rather servile. The present article discusses the feeble, frustrated, failed protests of the characters- Santiago, Ambrosio, Amalia, the prostitutes Hortentia and Queta. Only Santiago from these characters is from upper class. But he leaves his home, comfortable lifestyle and lives at a boarding house. He disinherits himself from his father's property and deliberately chooses to be 'insignificant'. All these characters are dragged into the quagmire of politics inadvertently. They strive to survive. They try to protest but end up in frustration, failure or in death. The present article intends to explore the protest journey of these marginalised individuals ending in failure and defeat in the novel.

Key Words: Protest, marginalized, centralization, insignificant, individual, dictatorship

Mario Vargas Llosa, born on March 28, 1936, is a Peruvian-Spanish writer, politician, critic, journalist, essayist, college professor and the recipient of the 2010 Nobel Prize in Literature. He is one of the prominent writers of Latin American Boom. His third novel *Conversation in Cathedral* published in 1969 is based on a historical, political event- the corrosive, oppressive regime of the dictator Manuel Odria during 1948 to 1956 and Llosa's personal experiences. The novel deals with the corruption, repression prevalent in every sphere of life during the dictatorship. It depicts how the unjust system touched and affected almost everyone in the country. Except a small privileged minority of rich, affluent, upper class of politicians and entrepreneurs it manipulated life of everyone. Mario Vargas Llosa presents us the events through the conversations of many characters, main of which is the conversation between Santiago Zavala, the son of a rich businessman and politician and Ambrosio, his father's chauffeur. Though the frustrated, failed protest of the protagonist Santiago against his father and the 'system' is at the central place of the novel, we also find the same events affecting many other marginalised and insignificant individuals in the novel. They are insignificant in the sense that they don't belong to upper or middle class of the society. They belong to poor, lower class and that is why they are ineffectual rather servile. The present article discusses the feeble, frustrated, failed protests of the characters- Santiago, Ambrosio, Amalia, the prostitutes Hortentia and Queta. Only Santiago from these characters is from upper class. But he leaves his home, comfortable lifestyle and lives at a boarding house. He disinherits himself from his father's property and deliberately chooses to be 'insignificant'. All these characters are dragged into the quagmire of politics inadvertently. They strive to survive. They try to protest but end up in frustration, failure or in death. Mary. E. Davis in her article "William Faulkner and Mario Vargas Llosa: the Election of Failure", calls it as "failure chosen by the characters as the honourable response to their situation." (Davis, 332)

Protest is an expression of strong disagreement with or objection to particular events, policies or situations. In literature, the protest is a statement of resistance against injustice or oppression. *Conversation in Cathedral* is no doubt a protest against corrupt, unjust, exploitative regime of the dictator Manuel Odria. As a political novel it delineates very effectively how during this regime- the constitutional rights were suspended, political parties forbidden, harsh censorship of press and radio and the politics sinking into something dirty and dangerous. It also deals with deeply unequal society where small privileged minority enjoying wealth and prosperity and large majority of poor people exploited and deprived from good education, salaries, and opportunities to improve in life. As Mario Vargas Llosa himself explains in 'The 2017 Berlin Family Lectures' on this particular novel, the story of dictatorship would give 'testimony' of what they lived during Odria regime. So far it is discussed much; the present article intends to explore the protest journey of the individuals in the novel.

Santiago Zavala is a son of wealthy businessman Don Fermin who has good relation in fact power ties with the government. He supports government to come to power and in return gets benefits for his business in the form of government contracts, relaxation in taxes. It's kind of give and take relationship. By using his money he assists Odria to come to power and once Odria grabs the power he gets the opportunities to earn profit in the business with government's assistance. Santiago hates his father because his father is supporter of the government who came to rule by using force. That is why he disobeys his father every time. Actually Don Fermin is a very ambitious man who has very meticulously reached to the upper class status. He is proud of his social status and consciously maintains it. He is fond of his son Santiago more than his other two children Sparky and Tete as Santiago is an intelligent boy who has received good grades in his class. Though Santiago is teased as 'Superbrain' by Sparky and Tete, made fun for writing poetry, Don Fermin is proud of his son and has lot of expectations from him. He expects that on the basis of his talent he should pursue a good career and be a successful person. For him being successful is being wealthy. He repeatedly and desperately insists Santiago to complete his law degree. He also insists him to follow his business. But Santiago rejects all these things and by disobeying at almost every stage in life he totally disappoints his father. First of all, in spite of wrath of whole family, Santiago joins San Marcos University which is a public university and as Santiago's father says "in San Marcos you didn't study anything, Skinny, they just played politics, it was a nest of Apristas and Communists, all the grumblers in Peru gather together there." (Llosa, 61) They want him to join Catholic University which is for upper class people. But Santiago upsets his father. Somehow his father accepts his being in San Marcos and still appeals Santiago to study and to achieve a good career. But Santiago gets mixed with Student Communist Unions and to his father's great surprise and disappointment he gets arrested. In fact it is out of revenge game of politics. To trap Don Fermin, Cayo Bermudez, the Director of Public Order has the phone calls of their house tapped. Inadvertently they get proof of Santiago being involved with the Communist Unions. Of course, he is released within few hours due to his father's political influence. But this incident proves to be turning point in the father-son relationship. Santiago's anger for his father, the system and also for himself for not sharing his comrades' destiny that is either jailed or exiled persists. He decides to leave the home and goes to live at a boarding house. This hurts Don Fermin a lot.

Though joining San Marcos itself is a protest, we don't find Santiago accomplish his idealistic ideals even there. We find him torn between disbelieving and uncertainty. Like his friends he cannot have complete faith in Communism. He joins them as "sympathiser." (Llosa, 138) He reads furiously revolutionary, Marxist literature, discusses among the students activist friends, and participates in clandestine meetings. But when he gets arrested, first time his father is furious with him, slaps him and scolds him that when he is dependent on his father he should only study. Frustrated Santiago leaves all of this abruptly, halfway. He leaves studies, his activist friends, San Marcos forever. He takes a job

as a newspaperman in a tabloid newspaper *La Cronica*, starts living at a boardinghouse and stops seeing his family. Santiago deliberately chooses to be 'mediocre' in life. He works at night shifts, gets meagre salary. But he does not try to improve the situation. As his father insists, he even does not pay attention to his law degree neither he tries for the promotion in the job of newspaper. It is only with the course of time he becomes editorial writer in *La Cronica* and given day shift of work. All this upsets his father very much but all he could do is explain him earnestly to go to law classes and complete the degree in order to have good career. But Santiago as if touched by existentialism doesn't find any meaning in progress. He even gets married by an "accident" (Llosa, 484) as he tells Ambrosio. While further telling about his marriage, Santiago says,

"No, I'm happy with it," Santiago says. "The only thing is that I really wasn't the one who made the decision. It was imposed on me, just like the job, like everything that's ever happened to me. Nothing was ever my doing, it was more like I was their doing." (Llosa, 486)

He is admitted in a hospital after an accident and there he meets Ana who is a nurse in the hospital. He marries Ana who is from middle class family and whom Santiago's mother calls "a social climber" (Llosa, 543) and his mother is furious with him for marrying a girl "who could be his servant". (Llosa, 542) Once again with his marriage he offends his family because Ana does not belong to upper white class. When he takes Ana to family for the first time, she is welcomed with the above humiliating words. This further widens the distance between Santiago and his family. He stops meeting them. He now lives in a rented 'little elf house' with Ana. He only visits his family when his father is hospitalized having heart attack. The tense relationship is somewhat softened at the meetings after the death of his father. But still he maintains a distance. Sparky comes to him with a proposal that he should accept something of the property earned by their father to which Santiago rejects outright. Sparky is really stupefied upon his refusal continuing his "bohemian" (Llosa, 588) life. Thus Santiago ends up in mediocrity, as a black sheep of the family, without finishing his University degree or law degree, without interest in politics, without any faith.

Another important character of the novel is Ambrosio. Throughout the novel he is described as submissive, silent, servile person. He belongs to lower Negro class. He gets job as Cayo Bermudez's chauffeur because he is from Cayo's hometown Chinchá and once has helped Cayo to run away with Rosa and marry her. While working for Cayo, he is seen by Don Fermin and picked up as his own chauffeur. The real reason behind this is Don Fermin's homosexual attraction for him. He can't reject Fermin's gay advances as later is his master's friend and afterwards he himself becomes his master. Later on he becomes admirer of Don Fermin as like a lover. We find him repeatedly expressing his respect for Fermin in the conversation with Santiago. Simultaneously he maintains his love relationship with Amalia. He helps her to get job at Cayo's house. He regularly meets her, takes her to restaurants, also assures her they will marry. He tells her that he will buy her a small house. But such simple

dreams are shattered due to political fluctuations. Don Fermin to revenge his son's arrest and also to diminish Cayo Bermudez's power organizes demonstrations at Arequipa along with other allies who were hurt by Cayo. Cayo resigns and leaves the country. His mistress Hortentia is left alone penniless. As she knows vices of Don Fermin, she uses it to blackmail him. She extracts money from him threatening him of informing about his homosexual relations with Ambrosio to his wife and relatives. Initially he gives her money. But she becomes more demanding. Ambrosio visits whorehouse and meets Queta who happens to be Hortentia's friend. We find he is insulted for being Negro. But he tolerates it. Even Queta teases him for his income. He is described as meek, servile, and humble even at whorehouse and his sexual relation with Queta. Though physically he is a big strong man, at heart he is submissive, docile man. He asks Queta to convince Hortentia that she should stop blackmailing Don Fermin. But Queta defies him. As Hortentia does not stop blackmailing Fermin, Ambrosio kills her. A servile, timid man like Ambrosio protests through such act of murder. But his protest too proves a failure, because he has to run away leaving his job and facing miseries. Don Fermin remains intact, untouched in this matter but this subversive act of murder by Ambrosio reverts back on himself. He goes to Pucallpa, a remote province in jungles along with Amalia. Don Fermin has given him money before leaving. But he is ruined in the business when cheated by a local rogue Don Hilario. He faces extreme tragedy of the death of his wife Amalia at the time of her delivery. He has to flee stealing a vehicle and selling it to reach to Lima. In Lima he does various trivial jobs for survival. He ends up being a dog-man at the municipal pound. His words which end the novel, "He would work here and there, maybe after a while there'd be another outbreak of rabies and they'd call him in again, and after that here and there, and then, well, after that he would have died, wasn't that so, son?" (Llosa, 601) express his pessimism regarding the future. Through these words we find Llosa himself questioning the country's fate.

Through the character of Amalia, Llosa depicts the impact of the political strategies on almost harmless, innocent people. Amalia is a domestic servant working in Don Fermin's house in the beginning and afterwards at Cayo Bermudez's house. She is a representative of naïve and complacent who are contented with small things. But even these small pleasures do not last in their lives. We see her vulnerable to situation and various ups and downs in her life. Her husband Trinidad is arrested for being supporter of APRA and beaten to death in the custody. She hasn't slightest idea what it is that her husband involved and who killed him. She is in hospital admitted for delivery. Her baby is born dead. She is even not in the condition to mourn her husband. Ambrosio helps her to get work at Bermudez's house. She finds her mistress Hortentia's lifestyle very strange. Hortentia, a prostitute leads a very carefree, happy-go-lucky, lavish life. Amalia is surprised at first, but afterwards she gets used to it. Whatever her mistress be, Amalia works dutifully and loyally for her. She feels the difference how Fermin's wife, Senora Zoila would give the servants inferior treatment and Hortentia's well treatment to her. That is why she remains loyal to her even in her extreme

difficult days. By narrating events from Amalia's point of view, we find Llosaelaborating her emotional world and thereby bringing to forefront the tragic world of a marginalized domestic maid servant. Her lover, Ambrosio tells her to leave the job with Hortentia. But she follows self-decision here and remains with her mistress. We see her making up her mind to go against her lover. She decides to live on her own if he abandons her. When Hortentia is killed, she is not there as she was admitted in the hospital by Hortentia herself for delivery. When she learns the shocking news, she is very sad for her mistress. She christens her girl child after her mistress as Amalita Hortentia. This is a kind of protest on her part. She shows the daring of naming her child after a prostitute's name. However, she has to run away from Lima with Ambrosio to save herself from the police in the case of Hortentia's murder. She lives at Pucallpa with Ambrosio and Amalita Hortentia. But her happiness could not last long as financial misfortunes crush the family. She dies miserably at a maternity hospital. As Mary Davis has pointed out, "...modern literature works from the periphery, with marginal characters whose very marginality mirrors the tragedy at society's center. Vargas Llosa connects this oblique process with his literary heroes..." (Davis, 336)

Llosa depicts a murky world of prostitutes and their connections with politicians. Hortentia, alias The Muse a prostitute and nightclub singer is brought home and made his mistress when he is at the peak point of his political career. He arranges parties at home and many of the politicians are the guests for these parties. Hortentia and Queta are used as entertainer for the guests. Hortentia enjoys lavish, extravagant life as long as Cayo Bermudez has political power in his hand. When his opponents turns table upon him, he has to resign from his position and leave the country. Queta was repeatedly asking Hortentia to have a car, house in her name but later has ignored the advice. Now she is left penniless. She has to turn again to her singing profession. But now she could not perform that much well. Also she could not get customers as before. She faces extreme financial crisis. In addition to it a young man, pretending himself as her lover exploits her financially. She is madly in love with him. But he steals her jewellery and runs away. Helpless and mentally disturbed she is addicted to the drugs. Her lover has gone Mexico and he summons her from there. He tells her to bring money with her. She desperately wants money for passport and to go to abroad. She tries to extract the money from Don Fermin by blackmailing him. He gives her money initially. But Ambrosio kills her to get rid of her everlasting demands. Hortentia challenges the privileged person like Don Fermin for the sake of her survival. But she is murdered mercilessly. Queta knows who the killer is because Ambrosio has warned Queta regarding Hortentia's blackmailing Don Fermin. Queta defies Ambrosio on this in spite of his being a chauffeur of an influential person. She vehemently denounces Don Fermin and Ambrosio for the murder in front of the reporters of *La Cronica*. She insists to print the names of the killers. Initially, to dig out the mystery of the murder the reporter assures her that he would print the truth. But the matter is suppressed as Carlitos consoles Santiago "Upper-crust people never appear on the police page". (Llosa, 357) Don Fermin's name is not at all connected with the murder as he is

an upper class person. Ambrosio has to disappear from the city to save himself from the police. Thus, Mario Vargas Llosa through portrayal of protest journey of these characters, gives us glimpses of grim, tragic realities of Peru as stated in the opening of the novel, "Peru all fucked up, Carlitos all fucked up, everybody all fucked up. He thinks: there's no solution." (Llosa, 3)

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